Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust

A Consideration of Dirt and Its Material and Mythological Significance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*

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Tutkielmassa käsitellään ilmakehän saastumista aiheuttavaa likaa ilmastofiktioteoksissa ei-inhimillisenä toimijana, joka muuttaa amerikkalaista ympäristöä ja täten haastaa amerikkalaisia luontokäsityksiä. Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan kahta romaania, Cormac McCarthyn *The Road* (2006) ja Paolo Bacigalupin *The Water Knife* (2015). Teokset edustavat spekulatiivista ilmastofiktiota, ja molemmissa teoksissa miljöö on tuhkan tai tomun peitossa. Tutkimus pyrkii tunnistamaan ne tavat, jolla tämä lika esiintyy ei-inhimillisenä toimijana, rikkoen amerikkalaisia luontokäsityksiä.

Tutkimusta lähestytään myyttikriittisen ja materiaalisen ekokriittisen viitekehyksen kautta. Ilmastofiktio on myös tärkeä, argumenttia raamittava konsepti. Ilmastofiktio tyylilajina osoittaa, kuinka ilmastonmuutos haastaa kirjallisuuden konventioita ja näin muuttaa tapaamme ymmärtää maailmaa. Materiaalisen ekokriittisen luennan kautta tutkielmassa avataan tapaa, jolla lika haastaa näitä luontokäsityksiä ei-inhimillisenä toimijana.

Tutkielman ensimmäisessä analyysiluvussa teoksia tarkastellaan myyttikritiikin kautta, ja luvussa osoitetaan, että molemmat teokset hyödyntävät juutalaiskristillisestä mytologiasta kumpuavia amerikkalaisia myyttejä. *The Road* ja *The Water Knife* viittaavat narratiiviin paratiisin takaisinsaamisesta. Narratiivi pohjautuu juutalaiskristilliseen luomiskertomukseen. Tarinan mukaan Jumala on antanut ihmiskunnalle määräysvallan luontoon, ja ihmiskunta voi palauttaa paratiisiin maan päälle kovalla työllä. Kyseinen narratiivi on muovannut amerikkalaisten suhdetta luontoon. Myyttiviittaukset luovat ristiriidan myyttisten luontoihanteiden ja teosten apokalyptisen, ilmastonmuutoksen muokkaaman miljöön välille. Tutkielman toisessa ja kolmannessa analyysiluvussa teoksia tarkastellaan materiaalisen ekokritiikin ja myyttikritiikin kautta keskittyen likaan ei-inhimillisenä toimijana. McCarthyn teoksessa tuhka rikkoo luontoideaalia aiheuttamalla maailmanlaajuisen sukupuuton, tekemällä ympäristöstä ennalta-arvaamattomamman ja haastamalla käsitteellistä rajaa ihmisen ja luonnon välillä. Bacigalupin teoksessa tomu haastaa luontokäsityksiä vaikuttamalla päähenkilöiden tapaan ymmärtää ympäristöään ja rikkomalla ihmisen ja luonnon välillä olevaa käsitteellistä rajaa.

Tutkimuksen perusteella sekä McCarthyn että Bacigalupin romaanit viittaavat amerikkalaisiin myytteihin ja myyttisiin trooppeihin luodakseen ristiriidan luontokäsitysten ja ilmastomuutoksen tuomien realiteettien välille. Lähestymällä teoksia materiaalisen ekokritiikin tulokulmasta lian rooli ei-inhimillisenä toimijana ja amerikkalaisten luontokäsityksien haastajana korostuu. Kirjalliset konventiot uudelleenmäärittyvät teoksissa ilmastofiktiolle ominaisella tavalla.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
Materiaalinen ekokritiikki, myyttikritiikki, ilmastofiktio, maailmanloppu, luontokäsitykset, amerikkalaiset myytit

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1. Introduction

> They were crossing the broad coastal plain where the secular winds drove them in howling clouds of ash to find shelter where they could. (McCarthy 2006, 188)
>
> In the beginning Lucy had been religious about using her dust mask and changing its filter, religious about shielding her lungs against wildfire smoke and dust and valley fever. But after a while it was hard to care about invisible airborne *Coccidioides* fungi anymore. She lived here. This was her life. A dry hacking cough was simply part of that. (Bacigalupi 2015b, 81)

The aim of this thesis is to explore how a more-than-human agent, dirt, challenges human conceptions of nature propagated by Western mythology in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015). Both *The Road* and *The Water Knife* are climate fiction novels set in America and strongly invoke the American recovery narrative, creating a tension between the myth's anthropocentric premises and the environment, its material constraints and more-than-human agencies. The recovery narrative is a mainstream story used by cultures influenced by Judeo-Christian traditions, and particularly in America (Merchant 2003, 2), to justify the upheaval and commoditization of the land. The premise of the narrative is that humanity can recover the lost paradise through their own labor.

To give a brief consideration of terminology used in this thesis, I use the term "more-than-human" instead of "non-human" deliberately. Since I argue that dirt challenges this traditional distinction between human and nature, I want to use terminology that better "acknowledges and positions humans as *within,* as *of,* something bigger" (Affifi 2016, 161) instead of placing a dichotomous boundary between the human and everything that is not human. Additionally, I mainly use the concept of climate change to refer to anthropogenic impacts in this thesis as the term "Anthropocene" is contested and problematic (Brondizio et al. 2015). "Anthropocene" is used to describe the current geological epoch, marked by human activity that has had a lasting impact on the Earth through greenhouse gas emissions and its subsequent climate impacts, the growing human population, and the human exploitation of the Earth's land surface, to name a few examples (Trexler 2015, 1). However, the term "Anthropocene" does appear throughout this thesis as scholars use it to conceptualize anthropogenic impact.

The concept of climate fiction directs my discussion of the novels to the theoretical approaches. Defined by Adeline Johns-Putra as "fiction concerned with anthropogenic climate change and global warming as we now understand it", she regards the literary phenomenon of climate fiction, or cli fi,

as a topic that works of fiction of different genres touch upon (Johns-Putra, 267). Adam Trexler also marvels at the breadth of different genres represented in climate fiction as there is no single idea or influence echoed in all climate fiction nor has it arisen from a particular literary circle of authors (Trexler 2015, 10-11).

In his book on what he terms the "Anthropocene novel", Trexler elaborates on the impact of climate change on the narrative potential of the novel, stating that "[w]hen a novel incorporates things implicated in climate change…it becomes impossible to read without the preoccupation of climate change" (Trexler 2015, 15). Elaborating on the more theoretical implications of climate change, Trexler argues that the novel is based on "the tension between fact and invention, history and place, society and interiority, and the practice of making a living", which are essential to creating meaning. He adds that "each of [these sites] is being radically reordered as we locate ourselves in the Anthropocene" (15). To explain how climate change challenges generic conventions, he gives some examples; he invites his reader to consider how the meaning of a suspense novel changes when the hero character drives a sports car and blindly serves a climate change-progressing government (14). As one can see, climate change has many narrative implications, which "threaten to rupture the defining features of genre" (14), and hence novels placed within its context can no longer be neatly categorized.

Therefore, scholars discussing climate fiction as a literary phenomenon avoid describing it as a genre of its own, because neatly boxing it away would ignore the transformative impact of anthropogenic climate change on literature and everything else. Caren Irr summarizes how scholars like Adam Trexler and Kate Marshall rather approach cli fi as "a direct, multigenre response to the narrative challenges involved in representing the global changes to the environment" brought on by humans (Carr 2017). Approaching cli fi as a reply to narrative conventions brings up some crucial points motivating this thesis. Genre-wise, the novels discussed in this thesis are generally considered to fall into the vein of (post-)apocalyptic science fiction, read by some as commentary on climate change. Though Bacigalupi's novel is cited as a climate change novel with little dispute, *The Road*'s status as a cli fi novel is a more contentious topic in academic circles (Trexler 2015, 17).

1.1 Synopses of *The Road* and *The Water Knife*

Because climate change and its impacts are thematically central in climate fiction, the setting is particularly important in this literature. Though the worlds presented in the two novels are drastically different from one another, a commonality between the two is an abundance of dirt dispersed in the

atmosphere. In *The Road,* a man and his son are traveling through a post-apocalyptic wilderness towards the south of the former United States south some years after the American environment has been devastated by an unnamed cataclysm, symptomized by an ashen biosphere and atmosphere. Their migration is driven by the acknowledgement that they would not survive another winter in the cooling climate. Mainly focalized by the father, who is haunted by the memory of the world before the apocalypse, the novel follows him watch the environment around him disintegrate into ash. The boy, born after the cataclysmic event, knows no other existence, but is depicted as an embodiment of virtuousness despite their circumstances. The bleak, ashy and infertile landscape, their slow starvation, and the occasional encounter with people who rely on cannibalism and brutality for their survival heighten the tension between human survival and the maintenance of a sense of morality and dignity.

As stated earlier, the status of *The Road* as a climate change novel is contested. Because the onset of the depicted environmental change cannot be read as anthropogenic nor non-anthropogenic, literary critics have remained undecided on whether it can be placed in a canon markedly interested in the junction between human activity and climate change (Johns-Putra 2016, 520; Stark 2013, 71). What it lacks in cause it makes up for in effect, however. For the readership, the novel plays off the concerns related to climate change, or, as Adeline Johns-Putra elaborates, "it owes much of its cultural impact to climate change, at least to the anxieties that have accompanied it" (Johns-Putra 2016, 520). Cli fi often aims to concretize climate change and mobilize its readers by setting them in a catastrophe with characters they resonate with (Trexler 2015, 72). Whether or not its intention is to activate its readership around environmentalism, it comes as no surprise that *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot has pinned it as the "most important environmental book ever written" (Monbiot 2007). *The Road* affects its readership in a similar way as cli fi.

Looking to the narrative, climate change builds conflict and is the central motivation for the protagonists' journey southward. Hence, the apocalyptic, changing climate is not only a backdrop, but also the driving force of the narrative. Though the cause of the apocalypse remains unclear, the climate is radically changing, accompanied by the near total extinction of plant and animal life. Though hunger is considered by some scholars as the primary driver of the narrative (Mullins 2011, 78), hunger is the affective, visceral symptom of climate change and a diminishing ecosphere. Furthermore, if access to food were their only motivator, the cardinal direction of their migration would be inconsequential. The two protagonists, however, have a "singular purpose and direction" (Warde 2010). Despite their near constant hunger, the man still reflects on their situation holistically and reacts to the inhospitable environmental changes. Mainly discussing the film adaptation of

McCarthy's work, E. Ann Kaplan remarks how nature, "hostile and dangerous to the couple, provides as many dangers and difficulties for them as do other surviving humans" (58).

The Water Knife, on the other hand, does directly address climate change. Described as an eco-thriller (von Mossner 2017, 173), the novel is set in the American Southwest, mainly in Arizona, where a long-standing drought has resulted in access to water becoming the subject of heightened political tensions between states. Advantaged Nevadans live luxuriously with near unlimited water, while climate refugees, particularly Texans, struggle and die in Phoenix, Arizona as they attempt to flee to the Northwest. The story is focalized by three protagonists: Angel, a money-driven gun-for-hire working for the Southern Nevada Water Authority; Lucy, an ambitious journalist who has stayed in Phoenix to document the plight of climate refugees and the political corruption surrounding "water rights"; and Maria, a migrant who peddles water and is willing to use any means necessary to survive and make a better life for herself. Though the novel is set as a thriller, it explores the brutality of the fight for survival when land no longer supports humanity and the political system is rigged against the disadvantaged.

Bacigalupi consciously seeks to engage in the broader discourse surrounding climate action through his climate fiction. In the foreword of a saga anthology of climate fiction, Bacigalupi discusses the function of climate fiction and his own role as a cli fi author: "And if we writers do our jobs well…[the readers] will see the world differently" (Bacigalupi 2015a, xiv). He adds that technofixes for climate change, such colonizing Mars to create a new habitat, are the true science fiction, even fantasy (Bacigalupi 2015a, xv). Instead of envisioning a realistic future, we let our projections of the future be vividly escapist, grounded in long-standing myths. Bacigalupi suggests that we nourish the fantasy of relocating to an "Earth 2.0" because of the "powerful mythic concepts" of "adventure, frontier, reinvention" it represents to us (Bacigalupi 2015a, xvi). Though he does not explicitly speak of climate fiction as an avenue to reconceptualize our very notion of nature, this dimension is implied. As the concluding words of this foreword to a climate fiction anthology, he proposes a better approach towards the environment, one where humanity does a "profoundly unsexy thing, and actually [cares] for the garden that we evolved within", adding that this, rather, is "maybe a myth worth dreaming" (Bacigalupi 2015a, xvii). Bacigalupi acknowledges that humanity is informed by our mythologies in how we relate to our environment, and cli fi is an avenue to renegotiate this relationship.

As a body of works, cli fi challenges genre and storytelling to reflect the realities of climate change. Trexler points out how cli fi "must change the parameters of storytelling, even to draw on the tropes of recognizable narratives" (Trexler 2015, 14). In my view, this includes possibly the most slippery and prevalent of tropes, the mythical ones. If anything, challenging mythical narratives and tropes in

storytelling is perhaps the most vital task of cli fi because of their predominant role in the way we make sense of the world.

Digressing from the limitations of the narrative, this thesis explores how the two cli fi novels interact with and transform the American myths they draw upon. As Karsten Schulz points out, "there is growing awareness among scholars from various disciplines that storytelling and mythical thought have long prefigured philosophies on human-nature relations and left their traces in our collective social imaginaries" (Schulz 2017, 47). Climate change challenges and transforms our understanding of the world around us, both exposing the fallibility of our anthropocentric attitudes as well as the complexity and multitude of players in this cosmic arena. Approaching the novels as climate fiction calls us as readers to reposition ourselves to these deep-set myths of the environment, ideas that have mandated self-serving treatment of the more-than-human.

Like many other examples of cli fi, the plot of *The Water Knife* and *The Road* is driven by "a dramatic transformation in the setting" with "a preoccupation with the instability of objects and the permeable boundaries between human and nonhuman lives" (Carr 2017). A symptom and cause of the portrayed climatic transformations is dirt. As imaginative projections of the "futurity of climate change" (Yusoff and Gabrys 2011), the two novels imagine dirt as an environmental uncertainty. As cli fi novels engage in reordering meaning-making, I want to explore how dirt is involved both in altering the settings and negotiating the concept of nature. Reading the two novels as works of climate fiction hence directs my discussion to the theoretical approaches of this thesis, mythcriticism and material ecocriticism.

1.2 Introducing thesis approaches and structure

As the manifestation and adaptation of particular myths in the two novels are directly discussed, reading their use as a discursive shift towards a more non-anthropocentric outlook, this thesis falls into the cross-section of mythcriticism and material ecocriticism, leaning more on theoretical tradition of the latter and employ material ecocritical concepts when delving into a close reading of dirt. In regards to my theoretical approach, the key concepts I use are Serenella Iovino's and Serpil Oppermann's foundational assumptions for a material ecocritical reading, Heather I. Sullivan's dirt theory and dirty aesthetics, and Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which are unwrapped in greater detail later in my theoretical background chapter.

Since I explore how nature attitudes are influenced and encapsulated in Western mythology, my thesis also falls into the tradition of mythcriticism. To break down these myth-propagated ideas of nature, I draw on Carolyn Merchant's work, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, which

summarizes how Judeo-Christian myths have shaped our attitudes towards the environment. Considered a classic by many, in her work, Carolyn Merchant attempts to untangle the major ecological crises by looking to the recovery narrative, Garden of Eden myths, and their historical impacts on the way we relate to and conceptualize nature. Applying a narrative approach, she argues that this powerful narrative functions as a justification for westward movement as well as the transformation of this land into the original garden or a reinvention of it (Merchant 2003, 4-7). I use her work as the central resource for its comprehensive analysis of the myths' effects in the Western, particularly American, context. Merchant rounds off her work by exploring new narratives on nature.

Approaching the novels through the theoretical paradigm of material ecocriticism, I argue that, through this dialogue and tension between the mythical and material aspects of dirt in the settings, the dirty matter challenges American nature attitudes by revealing ecological complexities and unpredictability, and placing putative human/more-than-human boundaries into question. My research question is: how does dirt as a more-than-human agency revise the mythical and material ideas of nature presented in the works?

Nature attitudes and mythologies have and continue to shape the way we approach the natural world and position ourselves within it. Despite the distinctively Western impulse to separate the human and more-than-human, we are moving towards a more comprehensive understanding of the many complex agencies impact us and others on earth. Literary works that engage with the climate change phenomenon in its many facets, known as climate fiction, or cli fi, seems to take a preoccupation of discussing the agential complexities of our environments and its changes, and provides ample ground to renegotiate the way we as humans apprehend and define ourselves within our environments. Though I do not necessarily think this has been intentional from Cormac McCarthy and Paolo Bacigalupi, I consider a material ecocritical reading to be an interesting exploration of the way the materials around us can challenge the way we view the environment and our own place within it and hence challenge our mythologies as a result.

In terms of this thesis' structure, I begin by opening up the central theoretical paradigm and concepts of this thesis in the theoretical chapter. In the first analysis chapter, I draw attention to how the novels refer to Judeo-Christian mythology, namely through the presentation of a paradise, or Eden, and through allusions to America's frontier past. With this chapter, I demonstrate how the evocation of these myths builds a sense of irony in the reader as the novels' environments no longer yield to the ideals it presents.

In the second and third analysis chapters, I continue my close reading of the *The Road* and *The Water Knife*, respectively, now discussing the role of atmospheric dirt as a more-than-human agent. I argue

that dirt is pivotal in challenging the expectations of nature by modifying the environment, introducing unpredictability, and defying human-imposed boundaries between the human and more-than-human. Finally, I round my thesis off with a conclusion, suggesting some fascinating future routes of inquiry that emerged during the writing of this thesis.

Within the critical discourse on these two novels, material ecocritical angles have not been widely applied, much less has there been a consideration of the more-than-human actors within the novels. Though there is a fair amount of ecocritical scholarship on McCarty's novel, scholars have mainly focused on questions of morality and allegory. In regards to Bacigalupi's work, it has not been the subject of much academic discourse, perhaps because it is a relatively new novel published only four years ago and is a science fiction thriller novel. Though dirt is a central feature in both the novels, important in creating an apocalyptic atmosphere to the novels, it has hardly been discussed in scholarly works, or has merely been mentioned as an afterthought.

The value of applying a non-anthropocentric theoretical frame when reading the novels is the exploration of existence in an environment that goes against occidental nature maxims. The concept of the Anthropocene has changed the manner in which we conceptualize our existence in the world, both on the global scale as well as our immediate bodily experience. As climate novels overtly placing their characters in settings experiencing the effects of climate change, *The Road* and *The Water Knife* reflect this complexity and within themselves deconstruct the attitudes instilled in the mythologies of nature, particularly in that of the recovery narrative.

2. Background and Theoretical Approaches

To give an idea of the cultural context of the two novels, the distinctive manner in which Americans approach their environment and its ecological consequences are first considered. As American attitudes towards nature have been informed by mythology, the role of Judeo-Christian mythology in America is summarized. After the background and formation of American attitudes towards nature is considered, the theoretical approaches of this thesis are defined. I begin by considering mythcriticism and the related theoretical concepts as an approach in this analysis. Material ecocriticism and the concepts used are then outlined. Finally, I end this chapter with an overview scholarly works on *The Road* and *The Water Knife* most relevant to my reading.

2.1 An American approach to the environment

The Road and *The Water Knife* draw on American nature expectations as a reference point to enhance the shock value of the apocalyptic environment and its more-than-human actors, but it also ties these narratives into our wider occidental cultural attitudes regarding nature. As I argue that the environment and dirt are portrayed as starkly different to the reader's conventional ideals of American land, it is necessary that I give a brief overview of traditionally American attitudes towards land and the emergence of these feelings.

Jumping into the particulars of American attitudes on the environment, I want to provide a brief discussion of the origins and assumptions of the distinctly Western approach to the natural world in tandem. Markedly occidental attitudes stem from the foundational idea that there is a stark divide between culture and nature, an assumption adopted by every prominent Greek and Roman philosopher (Coates 1998, 28). Environmental historians and ecophilosophers have extensively discussed the foothold of this dichotomous approach to the human and more-than-human realms and its particularly devastating repercussions in the American context.

To give an idea of these philosophical origins, ecophilosopher J. Baird Callicott traces the basis of European environmental thinking to Greek antiquity (Callicott 1982, 296). He makes the argument that Pythagoras was a foundational thinker in laying the direction of how Europeans, and consequently American settlers, conceptualized nature. Firstly, Callicott relates how the rational notion that "the *order* of nature can be successfully disclosed only by means of quantitative description" was originally Pythagorean, which transferred into later European thought as an approach to nature as passive and mechanical (297-298). Secondly, he argues that Pythagoras introduced the stark separation of the divine soul and the "hostile physical world" to Western thinking, which has strongly influenced the emergence of Western nature attitudes, including Pauline Christianity and, later, the philosophies of Decartes (298).

The ideas of ancient philosophers have no doubt been influential in our contemporary beliefs and conceptualizations of the natural world. What, however, are distinctly American nature ideals that arise from them, and what makes them particularly substantial as to be the focus of this critical analysis? In the opening chapter of *The Wealth of Nature*, Donald Worster paints an image of the ecological richness of the American continent prior to the arrival of European settlers. It was a place "brimming with exquisite wild beauty, offering to agriculturists some of the earth's richest soils, incredible stands of trees" with "the infinitude of animals that once teemed but are now diminished or gone" (Worster 1993, 4). Recognizing that the environment has been transformed after the arrival

of European immigrants, he sets out to answer why they had such a profound impact, a complex question that has puzzled environmental historians (6).

Crucially, Worster states that "[i]t's a culture thing. The most adequate explanation for that destruction…lies in American attitudes toward nature and our place in it" (8). Tracing back to antiquity, these environmental ideas were formulated into their "recognizably modern form" in the 18th century and would ultimately have "cataclysmic ecological consequences" (9). Worster pins the crucial idea as that of America as the Garden of Eden from Judeo-Christian mythology, identifying and unpacking a few of its underlying themes (9). The first theme is "the belief that [North American] nature…is a complete, eternal, and morally perfect order", and "unshakeable" in its permanency, the order of nature as a whole cannot be changed (9-10). An extension of the trope of nature as perpetual order, the American idea of nature also encompasses an expectation of abundance that cannot be depleted.

Though primarily concerned with the phenomenon of expansionism in the 19th century, one of the classic works discussing the impact the vast land of the American West has had on American consciousness, literature, and social thought is Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Smith gives valuable insight into the mythical status of the American wilderness, which has impacted both modern nature writing and the American approach to nature. In the late 18th century, when British Empire began to explore the possibility of expanding into the American West, this area was viewed as "an almost infinite expanse of arable land" and "potential wealth on an unprecedented scale" (Smith 1950, 6).

Detailing the thoughts of dozens of thinkers, politicians, and writers from this period, Smith provides a general understanding of the utopic vision these Euro-Americans had towards an "American Empire", driven by the prospect of expansion to the West both for maritime control of the Pacific and for the agrarian potential of the fertile land (Smith 1950, 12). Leo Marx also observes how the ideal of American pastoralism traces all the way back to the "discovery" of the continent and its subsequent settlement by European. As a concept, American pastoralism is complex and oxymoronic, but is often used to refer "to the dreams that explorers nurtured of a life of ease in nature", free from the vices of society (Sayre 2013, 4). The imaginations of settlers was captivated by the possibilities of fulfilling the Virgilian "poetic fantasy" of "withdraw[ing] from the great world and begin[ning] a new life in a fresh, green landscape" (Marx 1964, 10). The vast land was hence strongly associated with romantic ideals of abundance and, even more acutely, the discovery of it. Moreover, interior America became a powerful symbol in 19th century American society, referred to as "the Garden of the World" by Smith and crystallized in the image of "the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed

with…the sacred plow" (Smith 1950, 123). The utopian epic that continues to live on in the American imagination, shaping attitudes towards agriculture and nature, has its origins in Judeo-Christian myths. In the follow section, I attempt to compactly describe the most influential Judeo-Christian myths for the purposes of this thesis.

2.2 Judeo-Christian mythology in America

Myths have a powerful hold on the cultural imagination, and Judeo-Christian mythology has been culturally pervasive particularly in colonized America. Focusing on the American Adam, a sub-myth of the Garden Myth, Viorica Patea considers the strong mythic impulse of America from its very emergence as a nation state:

> American history begins as a desire to regain paradise, and this second stage of the biblical myth will become the central and defining issue of American culture. For America proceeds out of a universal desire for rebirth (Patea 2001, 16).

Numerous scholars have discussed the real-life impact of Judeo-Christian myths on American attitudes towards the land. In the American context, the story of "reclaiming and redeeming a fallen earth by human labor" translated into a frontier mentality and the complete upheaval of the environment for these European invaders (Merchant 2003, 7). Discussing what Carolyn Merchant identifies as the recovery narrative, Donald Worster himself term the "irrigation myth". He states that the West impacted the American version of the tradition by "suggest[ing] that a mythic paradise could now be regained, in this age, by people like you and me; that at the very heart of the West lay a real desert out of which could materialize at last a real, Christian, sanctified Eden" (Worster 1994, 121). In his work, which focuses on the transformative power this myth has had on American agricultural practices, looking specifically to the history of irrigation in Idaho, Mark Fiege discusses how "the garden myth became an epic of personal and national regeneration", highlighting that this narrative is a staple part of the American identity (Fiege 1999, 171).

Judeo-Christian mythology has guided and been historically impactful on American attitudes and policies. What, however, is the value of considering mythology in the present day in respect to climate change? It is easy to dismiss myth as something archaic that surely does not have any relevance in this techno-capitalist society. This assumption is one that Daniel Botkin questions in his 2012 revision of *Discordant Harmonies.* In it, he addresses our tendency to consider mythology beneath us, having risen above what we consider practically prehistoric folklore to the age of technology and science

(Botkin 2012, xvi). In reality, he argues, the opposite holds, as "Western civilization" seems to be deeply embedded within and influenced by its myths (xvi). This is a supposition also maintained by Schulz who discusses the mytho-politics of human mastery, analyzing the influence of myth on the politics of the Anthropocene through the lens of decolonial theory (Schulz, 46-47). Schulz puts forth the idea that "Western ideas of human mastery…never developed in a historical and scientific vacuum that was entirely free from mythical thought", especially in respect to the Judeo-Christian tradition (Schulz, 55).

Mythology and our understanding of nature are hence interwoven, informing our symbolic and conceptual ideas of it. Propagated by Christianity, the dominant culture force of the early modern period, "mythical themes of mastery" were gradually embedded into "the modern scientific and capitalist worldview" (Schulz, 55-56) and continue to inform our approach to the environment and our role in it. Even in many of the discussions around the Anthropocene, these narratives of human dominion are still prevalent, some scientists going as far as to suggest that it can be considered as an opportunity for human creativity and technology to solve environmental issues (Schulz, 56). In Botkin's assessment, the influence of "Judeo-Christian traditional beliefs" on general attitudes towards the environment and on the development of modern, particularly environmental, science has been largely overlooked (Botkin, xvii). Given the sway of mythology on nature attitudes and our simultaneous reluctance to acknowledge it, analyzing Judeo-Christian mythology in American climate novels provide a fascinating conjunction to explore.

2.3 Mythcriticism

Since the novels are approached through myth, using it as an interpretive method, brief consideration of the implications and criticisms of what is termed as mythcriticism, or mythological literary criticism. After acknowledging the pitfalls of mythcriticism in interpreting literary works, I then give my justification for why I consider American myths as a useful tool in accessing the two novels.

Because my approach relies so heavily on American mythology, I find it necessary to discuss the important concepts and criticisms of this interpretive approach. Based on the works I read in mythological literary criticism, many scholars carefully address the criticisms against mythcriticism, or even avoid the discussion entirely (Wrede 2014). This is probably in large part due to the difficulty of producing an all-encompassing definition of "myth" to begin with. Defined by Slotkin as "stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness", myths rely on a narrative form

and metaphorical language to relay ideology (Slotkin 1992, 5-6). In a nutshell, myths influence and are used to shape ideas, politics and, ultimately, the direction of the society they are produced in. Admittedly, this is a rather vague definition, making its application to literary criticism dubious, which is discussed by many including Eric Gould.

Attempting to make sense of the concept, Gould states that literary myth studies has still not resolved what myth refers to and what its significance is (Gould 1981, 5). Though Gould exclusively addresses the male subject, I assume that myth is equally interpretively multi-various applies to other genders as:

> Myth is a synthesis of values which uniquely manages to mean most things to most men. It is allegory and tautology, reason and unreason, logic and fantasy, waking thought and dream, atavism and perennial, archetype and metaphor, origin and end. (Gould 1981, 5)

As the elusive nature of the very concept of myth foreshadows, mythcriticism has been criticized for the concept's apparent vagueness and its casual application. In relation to mythological literary critics' assertions on myths, William Righter gives a cautionary reminder that myths are by nature "remote, complex, mysterious, and opaque" and "[w]hatever clear-cut and accessible meaning they have is one that we have invented for them" (Righter 1975, 80). Building on Righter's cautionary advice in approaching mythologies in literary criticism, William G. Doty adds that by "impos[ing] a prefiguration upon a text", the mythological literary critic can "do…violence to the actual authorial expression" (Doty 247). Here, Doty compares this danger to that of Freudian criticism, which often comes off as a seek-and-you-shall-find approach to literary works. Any scholar can decide that a fictional work draws on a particular myth and can probably find evidence in the work to support this.

Recognizing the strong foothold of mythology in how humans make sense of the world, myth yields an interesting perspective into the novels' treatment of climate change. Research into how people respond to climate change information has already indicated "the importance of cultural meaning, collective myth, and social memory", showing that "people filter and absorb information in terms of pre-existing cultural models, such about ideas of nature's fragility and how humans should interact with it" (Magistro and Roncoli 2001, 93). Accepting that myth is central to the way humans conceptualize their environment, I want to focus in on the Judeo-Christian myth of Garden of Eden and its use in the *The Road* and *The Water Knife*. Going into more specifics on the relationship between myth and nature attitudes, I look to Carolyn Merchant's work *Reinventing Eden*, which dives into the recovery narrative and its role in the way people have approached the environment in the Western context. The narrative as played a pivotal role in the emergence of modern-day America and, therefore, it is valuable to its ripple effect in the American context.

2.4 Carolyn Merchant's recovery narrative

As mentioned earlier, our attitudes towards the more-than-human have been drastically informed by the dominant religious tradition. Expanding on this idea, my thesis relies on the assumption that Judeo-Christian myths, the Garden of Eden myth specifically, have and continue to influence the ways in which Americans approach their environment. Carolyn Merchant's work, *Reinventing Eden,* is a resource summarizing these ideas and is used as the primary resource for the myth itself. In short, the recovery narrative has spurred humanity to attempt to return the wilderness to a garden through cultivation. The recovery of Eden story serves as the "mainstream narrative of Western culture", moreover "perhaps the most important mythology humans have developed to make sense of their relationship to the earth" (Merchant 2003, 2). My interest lies in the ironic tensions created through this quintessentially American understanding of the environment.

In framing the mythological origins of a American approach to the environment for my reading, I look to Carolyn Merchant's influential consideration of the occidental impulse to recover the pastoral utopia. She identifies and describes a version of the recovery narrative that she considers the mainstream story, characterized by "upward progress in which humanity gains power to manage and control the earth" (12). Using Merchant's concept in her analysis of the film *WALL-E*, Michelle Yates eloquently condenses the significance of this recovery narrative in the American context, stating that it is "a dominant discursive framework" that has been used to justify both the commoditization of the land and "European colonization and settlement of the Americas" (Yates 2014, 530). The mainstream narrative is founded in the traditional biblical narrative of humanity's fall from the Garden of Eden and its salvation through Christianity; however, in addition to humanity's spiritual recovery, the garden itself can be regained (Merchant 2003, 11). Notably, by the time of the Scientific Revolution, this Christian story was accommodated to serve scientific and technological advances as well as the emergence of capitalism (11). Though it is a secular narrative, the mainstream narrative has its roots in the Judeo-Christian origin story, while the alternative recovery narrative draws less on this religious tradition.

Since I later focus on the significance of soil and dirt in both novels, I pay particular attention to its mythic importance. It is apparent that dirt as a material plays a crucial role in the Garden of Eden in two ways. Firstly, it is the substance from which Adam and all animal life is created. Secondly, it also has the divine potential to sustain life on earth indefinitely. Unpacking these ideas further, I show how dirt becomes the fundamental site of contention between the divine Eden and the fallible, post-Eden environment, imparted through the recovery narrative.

Merchant outlines the myth that spurred the recovery narrative, also recounting its colossal impact on American culture and society. As already stated, the mainstream recovery narrative is an extension of the Judeo-Christian origin story, of the Garden of Eden myth. The original paradise symbolizes the idealized form of nature that humanity has since attempted to regain. This is a narrative that, as Merchant argues, both Europeans and Americans since the 17th century have internalized (Merchant 2004, 2).

2.5 Material ecocriticism

As stated before, I analyze the novels through the frame of material ecocriticism. As a paradigm, material ecocriticism is rather new, springing from the "neo-materialist renaissance after a period of dismissal of materiality as the main result of the so-called 'linguistic turn', namely the view that language constructs reality" (Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 75-76). It is set within new materialisms, which is an intellectual movement demonstrating the significance of this so-called "material turn" in environmental humanities, responding to the aforementioned linguistic one.

To convey the standpoint of material ecocriticism, it is useful to begin by considering what ecocriticism is, without the modifier. Crudely put, ecocriticism is the "study of the relationship between the human and the non-human" (Garrard 2012, 5). As Serenella Iovino points out, however, it is not merely the critical study of literature, because it invites us consider both "nature and culture, world and text" as interlaced and not separate from one another (Iovino 2016, 349). To make this more tangible, this can refer to how an ecological event is portrayed and unpacked in a literary text; however, it can also refer to how the world itself can be viewed and interpreted as a text of nature-culture interactions (349). This idea is central to material ecocriticism's interpretative frame.

The founding argument of material ecocriticism is the idea that "the world's material phenomena", or matter, "are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narrative, stories" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1). It is the study of how "material bodies" interact and produce meaning and discourses that we can then interpret (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 7), and relies on the reform of a few assumptions that we tend to take as self-evident. Firstly, it calls us to expand the way we think about agency in the "traditional subject-object delineation" and as a namely human attribute associated with will and rationality (Dürbeck, Schaumann, Sullivan 2015, 121). Human beings in the so-called Western context particularly tend to approach the world through a lens that posits humans as beings "endowed with mind and agentic determinations", while "the material world…has always been considered as passive, inert, unable to convey any independent expression

of meaning" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 2). Questioning this, material ecocriticism argues that agency does not require human intentionality. It does not even need to be animate, as "not everything that happens in this world and interferes with living systems is 'alive' in the biological sense" (3). Rather, agency is a "property of matter" (3). As we break out of our anthropocentric way of conceptualizing the very notion of agency, it invites us to rethink stories as well.

The second concept material ecocriticism reworks is our understanding of what constitutes as storytelling. The paradigm posits that storytelling is not an "exclusively human practice", which as an assumption limits the inscription of history to human subjects (Oppermann 2016, 89). Rather, the paradigm puts forth that all matter, whether organic or inorganic, creates and expresses stories. Hence, the aim is to explore different agentic properties and the way they combine and interact with other material forms and discourses (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 7). Additionally, it suggests that bodies intermingle with other bodies, human or more-than-human, with all kinds of matter and substances moving in and out of these bodies; in other words, material ecocriticism rejects the idea that human body is a closed system that participates in the world around them when it suits them (Sullivan 2014, 92).

Somewhat surprisingly, ecocriticism has only begun engaging with climate change recently (Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011, 192). Though ecocritics now engage with these topics, the dirty facets of nature, including waste, pollution, and dirt, have only been placed into critical discussion recently. Material ecocriticism with its acknowledgement of the agentic properties of the more-than-human have brought the less idyllic aspects of the environment into the discussion. Literary scholars such as Heather I. Sullivan, Susan S. Morrison, and Dana Phillips, to mention a few, have written numerous articles, focusing on the dirt, waste and the environmental disarray in the periphery of ecocritical interest. In accessing the environments of the two novels that are the focus of my thesis, I look to Sullivan's notion of "dirt theory".

Heather I. Sullivan considers the very concept of "nature" to be weighed with "dualistic and idealized connotations" (Sullivan 2011, 111). In the article introducing and applying this theory to literary works, she focuses on the "environmental roles attributed to dirt, whether grimy materiality, mythical status, or a combination of the two" (Sullivan 2012), acknowledging that the background for the theory is the "connection between soil and our bodies", emergent in narratives throughout human history. She suggests that it is "an antidote to nostalgic views rendering nature a far-away and 'clean' site", proposing that "there is no ultimate boundary between us and nature" and we are entirely enmeshed in it (Sullivan 2012, 1). In this vein, I want to explore how the novels portray and utilize

dirt in disentangling the dichotomies surrounding the concept of nature as it acts within the settings and the human body.

Additionally, she acknowledges the strong "mythological resonance" of dirt in the many works she discusses in her article. Reading Bacigalupi's well-known work, *The Windup Girl*, and Goethe's *Faust*, she states that both "narratives share mythological frameworks" (Sullivan 2012, 11) and "play with materiality and mythology" (Sullivan 2012, 10). Though Bacigalupi in particular "builds his text on a seemingly overwhelming material premise" (11), the entire novel heavily relies on the myth and symbolism of the Garden of Eden (Sullivan 2012, 9). Sullivan sees this interplay of the material and mythological as a modernity that acknowledges our cultural history and its "messy conjunctions" (11).

I see the novels as an exploration of a new way of negotiating with an environment that posits the human somewhere other than at the top of humanity's own anthropocentric hierarchy. Climate fiction's call to consider literature outside of merely the experiential capacities of the humans further strengthens my incentive to conduct a material ecocritical reading. Material ecocriticism provides a fresh entry point into *The Water Knife* and *The Road* where dirt as a more-than-human entity intermingles with human subjects, revealing the complex network and interplay of both human and more-than-human agencies.

The intersection of mythcriticism and ecocriticism has hardly been explored within literary criticism. The overlap of these two approaches, even more precisely a posthumanist approach to the ecocriticism, is a rather new and emerging location of literary criticism. The lack of overlay between the two is remarked upon in the introduction of a recently published issue of articles by *Ecozon@*, entitled "Mythology and Ecocriticism: A Natural Encounter", stating that "a shared locus in the study of myth and ecocriticism…has so far been vacant" (Junquera and Moreno 2018, 1). In this issue, scholars connect a variety of topoi including "Eden, the promised land…and the American West with the current situation of the world we inhabit, in terms of our relationship with the land and the more-than-human world" (Junquera and Moreno 2018, 1). This absence of prior study made me all the more curious to access the works through the presence of myth.

Junquera and Moreno make the statement that, in order to understand "our connections and disconnections with nature" both in history and the present-day, we must look to ancient myths and understand how they have been "presented and adapted in history and literature" (1). Both novels draw on the Garden Myth by positing a paradise juxtaposed with the otherwise apocalyptic landscape, and this idealized environment is accompanied by an edge of irony through its portrayal. In the case of *The Road*, the irony arises from the fact that the Eden merely exists in the man's fantasies or

dreams. *The Water Knife'*s Eden is a domed environment unattainable to the majority of the population, a demonstration of the failings of the capitalist system. Additionally, both novels draw on the heritage of the recovery narrative in the American context. This is done through over allusions to historically significant actors, outlooks and practices central to the American version of this narrative.

2.6 Overview of previous scholarly work

2.6.1 *The Road*

Despite the wide array of scholarly discussion surrounding *The Road,* few have discussed more-than-human agency in the novel or its stand in climate change discourse. I was unable to find any material ecocritical considerations of the novel with most of the literary criticism has focused on its stance as a work of post-apocalyptic literature.

Despite the lack of material ecocritical consideration, the significance of American mythology has been thoroughly considered in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic environment. Regarding *The Road* as "simultaneously McCarthy's most desolate and most humane novel", Inger-Anne Søfting discusses its ambiguity in terms of its genre placement (Søfting 2013, 711), appealing to American mythology to make her argument. She argues that "[e]xternal space, the natural physical world, constitutes a strong dystopian element, while inner space, the psychological inner life of the characters, constitutes a utopian element" (705), emphasizing the contrast between matter and mind. Søfting further argues that the interpretation of the novel as utopian is supported by how it appeals to modern American history and the Puritan view of America as the promised land, presenting the boy and the man as "incorruptible and with a manifest destiny to build a new civilization" (711). Like in many of the other reviewed articles, Søfting discusses the ending's ambiguity and its impact on whether the novel is read as a dystopian or utopian novel (711). The ending conveys a deep sentimentality and belief in the prevalence of good in humanity, but, simultaneously, the reader acknowledges the hopelessness and impending death of the boy given the earth's inability to sustain life forms (712).

In his article, Ben De Bruyn, on the other hand, considers the characters' relationship to nature, also discussing the significance of the novel's ending in length. In his analysis that aims to shed light on the ecologically ambiguous elements in the novel, De Bruyn identifies the ending as its "most enigmatic feature", hinting paradoxically "both at destruction and regeneration" (De Bruyn 2010, 785). As "nature" itself is disappearing as well as humanity's "mode of relating to nature", through

the symbolism applied to wildlife and other discursive devices, the novel's closing suggests the end of "the kinship between man and nature" (788). At the same time, De Bruyn also proposes that the memory, "a sense of awe and responsibility towards nature" have been imparted to the son and hence the kinship continues (788). Though I do not take as much of an anthropocentric perspective in my reading, I, too, suggest that the novel illustrates a change in the way nature is related to.

In much of the scholarly discussion surrounding the novel, critics have agreed that McCarthy's vision of the world is highly anthropocentric despite the novel's pessimistic outlook on humanity's survival. In her reading of the novel, Hannah Stark points out the prevalence of the human perspective, more specifically that of the privileged white male, despite the post-apocalyptic setting (Stark 2013, 80). Here, Stark discusses how the man is the archetypal "American Everyman", upholding American exceptionalism and "embod[ying] the characteristics associated with American individualism: self-reliance, resourcefulness, and independence" (81-82). Building towards a critique of privileging the human perspective discursively and suggesting that *The Road* falls into this anthropocentricity, Stark concludes that literature as well as literary criticism "must think critically about the relative place afforded to the human and non-human in contemporary texts" (82). Similarly, Adeline Johns-Putra's reading of the novel also considers the novel to be quite disinterested in more-than-human subjects.

Reading the novel as a work of climate fiction, Johns-Putra compellingly discusses on the manner in which the *The Road* induces a sense of anxiety through the inhumane treatment. Adeline Johns-Putra points out the apocalypse in apocalyptic literature "gains its imaginative power from its manipulation of our expectations about time…[relying] on a fundamental distinction between the pastoral that has been…lost and the wasteland that threatens in the present" (524). Unlike the eco-apocalypse, however, Johns-Putra argues that *The Road* alludes to the pastoral to remind of the totality of the loss (526) and, as a result, the parent/child relationship becomes the focus of the story. Furthermore, she argues that the imaginative power of the novel comes forth from the love between the parent and child and the "corresponding fear of the disappearance of that love" (531). Johns-Putra puts forth that the work "is not as interested in the nonhuman environment as it seems, requiring instead a relentless anthropocentrism for its logic" (531), but suggests that the novel "[correlates] the irrevocable violence done to the child's innocence with the irreversibility of environmental damage" (534). Despite the novel's clear anthropocentric lean, I argue that focusing on the more-than-human subjects does give room for a non-anthropocentric reading. By placing focus on atmospheric dirt as a significant novum, I suggest that the novel perhaps does rework American myths and hence provides space for a reading that shifts the more-than-human towards its epicenter. Given the lack of previous scholarly discussion on the more-than-human world of *The Road,* my reading takes a rather fresh approach in the canon of scholarship.

In the canon of scholarly readings on *The Road*, Sean Hermanson's analysis is one of the more curious in its exploration of the setting. According to his rather speculative reading, the novel is full of evidence that the veteran (McCarthy 2006, 301) who collects the boy after the man's death are living a sustainable life up in the mountains together with his family. Using McCarthy's environmental knowledgeability as evidence (Hermanson 2017, 8), Hermanson argues that the work is scattered with subtle clues indicating that there is a survivalist community in the Smoky Mountains. In his interpretation of the final paragraph, the enigmatic description of brook trout, Hermanson believes there is a substantial passage of time and the focalizer is either the boy himself or his descendent (8). He also argues that there is reason to suggest that the atmosphere is slowly clearing of ash, allowing levels of light necessary for photosynthesis to occur (7). Moreover, he makes the argument that the amount of light has been enough in the heights of the mountains to sustain the ecosystem and its human survivors (8). Though his assertions and conclusions are rather lofty, the strength of his reading is in its preoccupation with the science and materiality of the setting along with an appreciation for its symbolic and mythical nuances. I find his reflection on the implications of the ashen environment compelling in relation to my own reading.

2.6.2 *The Water Knife*

Unlike McCarthy's novel, which has been the subject of widespread scholarly interest, only a handful of scholars have written about *The Water Knife* and there are only a few in-depth analyses. In the article by Manjana Milkoreit, the consideration of *The Water Knife* remains rather shallow, with the novel merely illustrating a broader theoretical argument on the transformative potency of climate fiction. It, however, does provide insight into the tactics of Bacigalupi as an author.

In the article "Imaginary politics: Climate change and making the future", Milkoreit uses *The Water Knife* to illustrate her own theory of imagination; she sets out to argue that fiction can contribute to sustainability transformation (Milkoreit 2017). In doing so, she introduces the concept of socio-climatic imaginaries and emphasizes the political nature of imaginaries in society. She argues that imagination has the potency to instigate social change, specifically in regards to climate change. To illustrate how the forms of transformation and agency along with their distribution amongst actors, she uses *The Water Knife* as a dystopian imaginary of the impacts of climate change alongside Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Earth* (2015) as a utopian one.

Diving into the transformational capacity of fiction, Milkoreit discusses the ways in which novels can have immediate cognitive impacts on readers; furthermore, they can influence broader societal and

political discourse. To illustrate this, she discusses the way *The Water Knife* engages its readers' emotions in order to mobilize its readers on climate change. Bacigalupi's tactic, she argues, is to induce a sense of anxiety in the reader through evoking feelings of "fear, disgust and concern" (Milkoreit 2017). Unlike Kim Stanley Robinson who aims to give his readers the directions to a better future, Bacigalupi highlights the various ways in which we are headed in the wrong direction.

Milkoreit does not stop at the potential impacts of fiction; she also considers the role of fiction authors as political and social actors in sustainability transformation beyond their storytelling. She points out that, as an author, Bacigalupi engages in climate discourse on social media and readily participates in public speaking, encouraging his audience to understand the connection between his stories and the social and political circumstances (Milkoreit 2017). Like Milkoreit, the other article considering *The Water Knife* also focuses on the reforming potential of literary fiction.

The analysis of María Isabel Pérez Ramos examines the "socio-technological complexities" behind the Southwest's water management, focusing on the urban environments in three dystopian fictional narratives, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Rudolfo Anaya's *Alburquerque* (1992), and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife.* In her analysis, Pérez Ramos approaches the works through decolonial theory, arguing that literary fiction can be useful in the decolonial revision of water management in the region (Pérez Ramos 2016, 48). Looking at *The Water Knife*, she focuses on the water management depicted in the novel, discussing both the portrayal of water resources as well as the arcologies as "eco-enclaves" that highlight "prevalent power structure that ultimately foster eco-apartheids" (Pérez Ramos 2016, 54). In regards to the novel's contribution to decolonial thinking, Pérez Ramos states that the novel argues for the necessity of cross-cultural communication for future urban plans, basing her argument on the ending where a multi-ethic protagonists form a coalition to strive for a better future for themselves (Pérez Ramos 2016, 60). Given the lack of scholarship on the novel, my consideration adds to the body of literary criticism considering the significance of Bacigalupi's work as a work of climate fiction.

3. The American recovery narrative in the novels

As introduced in the theoretical chapter, the recovery narrative, accompanied by the Garden Myth, has had a substantial impact on the American environment, following the arrival of European migrants to the American continent. In this chapter, I want to demonstrate how *The Road* and *The*

Water Knife draw on this mythology, utilizing it in a comparable way to build a sense of dissonance in the reader. This is done through descriptions of Edenic environments, either manmade or imagined as well as through explicit references to pilgrims, settlers, and their beliefs. Both novels juxtapose the environment's demise with the recovery narrative, an optimistic supposition about human command over the environment, to create a sensory dissonance and heighten irony. The recovery narrative evokes with it an image of the Garden of Eden, nature in its supposed initial, harmonious state. As the novels allude to the recovery narrative, their settings are subsequently juxtaposed with the myth-propagated idea of nature. To understand the way the novels draw on the mainstream recovery narrative, it is therefore necessary to begin by considering the ideas instilled in this mythical environment, particularly in regards to dirt. Like Merchant, my aim is not to give a comprehensive survey or reinterpretation of biblical scholarship regarding the Garden of Eden or Genesis. Instead, Merchant's focus is on demonstrating "how the new millennium presents a major turning point" for the stories and counternarrative arising from the recovery narrative (Merchant 2003, 7), which I similarly attempt to do in the context of climate change in the novels.

The starting point of the Garden myth is an idyllic state of harmony and the position of power granted to humanity. The creation story, however, also presents an interesting dimension to consider in terms of humanity's relationship to earth and dirt, particularly from a material ecocritical perspective. To summarize the Christian origin story, which spans Genesis 1, 2, and 3, God created the earth and everything on it, the natural satellites, and finally "man" in God's own image. Created from dust, the very name "Adam derives from the Hebrew word *adama*, meaning earth or arable land" (13), tying the human to the material rather unequivocally. Before humanity's expulsion from Eden, nature "was an entirely positive presence" (Merchant 2003, 18) and everything existed in perfect harmony. Even the dust of the earth, which Adam and the animal kingdom are created from, is self-watering (18). Furthermore, the Christian narrative posits that humanity was granted a position of supremacy on earth by God. The first humans, Adam and Eve, "[were] instructed 'to be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it,' and [were] given 'dominion over the dish of the sea, the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth on the face of the earth'" (Merchant, 13). In the biblical story, the man, Adam, is given dominion over the land, and God even indirectly involves him in the creation process both by forming Eve out of his rib as well as bringing Adam the animals to name (13).

Once humanity sins, God banishes them from the garden and condemns them to mortality, which is presented in the Bible as a return to the dust of the earth. Death and dirt are hence almost synonymous, and the avoidance of a return to dust the imperative. As Merchant discusses in her work, humanity's original relationship with nature is lost when Eve and Adam are cast out of the garden, which onsets

"[t]he effort to recover Eden" (Merchant 2003, 18). In other words, the narrative proposes that humanity can only attain Eden through their own labor by cultivating the Earth, and the assumption that nature is a passive entity is pivotal to the recovery narrative (Merchant 2003, 25).

I now consider the explicit references the two novels make to the ideas compounded in the recovery narrative, justifying why the recovery narrative serves as a compelling frame through which the novels create a sense of irony between the mythical preconceptions of nature and the material limitations and agencies portrayed. Reading the two novels, it quickly becomes apparent that they both appeal to a similar, idealized American environment. Both have an idealized Edenic environment and both refer to America's frontier past; however, in both cases these references do not have a positive connotation.

3.1 Eden in the apocalypse

A form of an Edenic, idealized environment is juxtaposed with the apocalyptic environment in both novels; however, its existence and potential is problematized, adding nuance to the discussion over the recovery narrative's firm hold on the American environmental imagination. In *The Water Knife,* the Edenic haven has been manufactured using state-of-the-art technology and exists under an artificial dome, but is inaccessible to most despite the uninhabitable conditions outside of it. In *The Road,* Eden lives on in the imagination of the man. Instead of representing a safe haven, however, he sees these dreams of paradise as a hindrance and threat to their very survival. The two do also spend a brief moment in a physical paradise; though it saves them from certain death, their time there is presented as a moment of dangerous self-deceit. In the following section, I discuss these references to Eden in depth, juxtaposing them to the environment at large, and considering the irony that arises from the collision between paradise and ruin.

3.1.1 Eden in *The Water Knife*

Visions of an Edenic garden appear from the very beginning of *The Water Knife*, immediately tying the novel to American projections of paradise. Presenting an idealized and human-improved environment, the novel provides a vision of the recovered Eden, at last attained. Playing off this myth, the American solution to attaining the green haven, however, is presented alongside the ironies of its emergence. The structures are only accessible to a select, wealthy few and are almost humorously anthropocentric in its makeup. Analyzing its presence in Bacigalupi's work, I focus on the initial

introduction of the novel's setting as it familiarizes the reader with the central contentions of these contrasting environments, the human-controlled dome habitat and the outside environment, and also sets the tone for their discussion.

Though mainly set outside in a dry and dust storm-ridden Arizona, the beginning of *The Water Knife* is set in the paradise-like "arcology" called Cypress 1 in Las Vegas (Bacigalupi 1-2). The green, idyllic habitat is notably manufactured, the term "arcology" a compound word fusing "architecture" and "ecology", coined by architect Paolo Soleri (Arcosanti n.d.). The impression is one of human control over the environment, enhancing space, and now ecologies, into something ideal for the human inhabitant. Bacigalupi, however, opens his novel with two paragraphs reflecting on the nature of human sweat, fear, and survival, with the third-person narrator focalizing through Angel Velasquez, one of the three protagonists (1). With this opening, Angel, as a focalizer, grounds the reader in the anxiety of the storyworld.

The first sentences, describing a woman laboring in the heat and a "ten-year-old boy staring into the barrel of a SIG Sauer" (1), for example, are followed by the description of the unearthly paradise Angel is currently admiring (2). The effect of these layered experiences is unsettling, preparing the reader for the coexisting polarities and inconsistencies of the depicted Southwestern society. As von Mossner points out, it is noteworthy that Angel is not himself directly experiencing this sweaty, anxiety-ridden existence, but is rather in a more privileged environment and position (von Mossner 178). She points out that having Angel as the initial focalizer is pivotal for the readers' "initial understanding of the storyworld" (von Mossner 179). What she means by this is that the readers are provided exposition on the outside environment along with the ecological and socioeconomic particulars from a safe distance and from Angel's privileged perspective (179). In addition, I see this as the establishment of a point of comparison that feels familiar to the reader. The arcology has the feel of an indoor mall, though even more fantastical, a futuristic Eden. It also further heightens the reader's curiosity about the novel's setting, particularly the one outside of this techno-paradise.

In analyzing the depicted domed habitat, particularly the type of wildlife included therein, I want to consider Merchant's discussion of how the ideas of the recovery narrative have been translated in modernity. The likeness of arcology's description is uncanny with that of Merchant's discussion of the modern day revival of the recovered paradise, which she considers to be the enclosed shopping mall. In the eighth chapter of her book, entitled "Eden Commodified", she describes this strange capital-driven setting:

> Surrounded by a desert of parking lots malls comprise gardens of shops covered by glass domes, accessed by spiral staircases and escalators reaching upward towards heaven. Today's malls feature life-sized trees, trellises decorated with flowers, stone grottoes, birds, animals, and even indoor beaches that simulate nature as cultivated, benign garden…meandering tree-lined streams and ponds filled with bright orange goldfish. (Merchant 2003, 167-168)

Now, reading the description of Bacigalupi's domed paradise through Merchant's frame, it is apparent that Cypress 1 is presented as the ultimate outcome of the mainstream, "progressive narrative" that "ends in the human ability to reinvent the entire planet as Eden" (Merchant, 178). Though the depicted ecosystem is varied, the flora and fauna present are strikingly similar in a few ways. Firstly, as Merchant observes of malls, the more-than-human species are all "benign" to the human subject. As an extension of this, their primary function is to be aesthetically pleasing and useful. In the arcology, they do not have intrinsic value as beings, but are rather fitted together from different niches to serve as cogs in a machine.

Over the course of the first few pages of the novel, Velasquez, a hitman who works for the Southern Nevada Water Authority (or, SNWA), surveys the arcology's human and more-than-human inhabitants, relishing in the fruit of his blood-stained labor: "Angel leaned against the rail, enjoying the view. Sunlight filtered down from above, dappling bamboo and rain trees, illuminating tropical birds and casting pocket-mirror flashes on mossy koi ponds" (Bacigalupi 2015, 2). Through merely a single sentence, Bacigalupi manages to build an atmosphere of surreal serenity and harmony. The plant and bird life imply a tropical climate, and its vibrancy and vitality is further accentuated through the description of the abundant sunlight reflecting and playing off surfaces. A page later, it is revealed that the complex also has a river for fly-fishing, stocked with rainbow trout (3), which enforces the impression that this constructed garden is a commodity above all else, something to be consumed by its human inhabitants.

Looking to Bacigalupi's speculative environment, the arcology is an eerie projection of Merchant's proposed Eden of today, with all the comforts of a capital-built and -driven haven. Even with the very name of the Las Vegas arcology, known as Cypress 1, Bacigalupi enhances the unwavering confidence of its architects. Named after an evergreen tree, it reflects a certainty in the perpetually sustaining nature of this manmade environment. Examined through the lens of the recovery narrative, the portrayed arcologies are the techno-capitalist reincarnation of Eden. Though described as a well-lit, humid habitat with thriving plant life, the environment feels fractured by intermittent references to the accompaniments of a techno-capitalist society. References to the Cascade Trail, which conjures "an image of the rugged American wilderness in the minds of readers who have hiked along winding

mountain trails" (von Mossner, 178), are coupled with the unnatural image "[winding] around the cooling bore" (Bacigalupi 2015, 2). The invocation of a pastoral idyll interrupted by references to its mechanisms and technologies bring a strange intermingling of expectations, which the word "arcology" itself also expresses.

As mentioned, this second coming of Eden that reflects the idyllic aspirations for a lush and hospitable environment is an entirely closed off "artificial domed landscape" (von Mossner, 178). Even the manner in which Angel approaches Cypress 1, as if it were still merely an architectural model, heightens the complete control he perceives he has over this environment. Angel feels detached from the people within the arcology, musing that they were "[n]ot really people at all, more just the shapes of tourists and residents and casino workers, as in the biotects' development models" (2). In one of the few scholarly works that discusses this novel, Alexa Weik von Mossner reflects on this metaphorical distance brought on by his position of privilege and power as an employee of Catherine Case, the one "who controls a large part of the Colorado River and thus decides who lives and who dies in the region" (179). The rich and powerful strive to sustain the illusion of complete control over the environment, the arcology being a space that allows them to uphold these attitudes.

Designed by a "biotect", an invented profession which I take to denote an architect of a biosphere, the anthropocentric nature of the arcology's design is made apparent to the reader. As a system, everything in enclosed in the dome has a human-centered purpose, the animal and plant life portrayed as tools to enhance and better the human experience. Maria's friend, Toomie, muses over its biotechnical makeup: "Figure out how to balance all the plants and animals, how to clean up waste and turn it into fertilizer they can use in their greenhouses, how to clean the water, too…Nature does all the work, all the different little animals working together, like gears fitted inside an engine. Its own kind of machine" (Bacigalupi, 111). Viewing these more-than-human subjects through their functional value reflects the mentality of this society. Everything is commodified, merely replaceable cogs in the machine. Bacigalupi, however, problematizes this commodification of the more-than-human by drawing the reader's attention to the socioeconomically stratifying nature of the arcology.

From the commodification of the more-than-human to the recreation of an illusion of an ever-sustaining environment, Cypress 1 is very much a reflection of the commodified Eden Merchant describes. A manifestation of the techno-optimistic revival of an Edenic paradise, the arcologies provide a counterpoint to the havoc outside, an environment marked by instability and inhabitability for its human dwellers. Through this juxtaposition, Bacigalupi paints a social and environmental setup that is hard to reconcile.

The ironies of the recovery narrative emerge from namely two aspects. Firstly, as a capital-driven enterprise, it is a habitat reserved for the few and privileged. Because American Dream, practically synonymous with "metaphors like 'Paradise and 'Eden'", is accompanied by an egalitarian right to pursue new beginnings (Greene 1983, 179), the exclusionary nature of the arcology breaks from foundational American mythic virtues. Tied to this idea, the second factor is more significant for the focus of my thesis. The arcology is a solution in complete denial and isolation from the material realities at large outside of its barriers, maintaining an anthropocentric, capitalist vantage point. As the reader encounters the outside and its inhabitants, the arcology's capitalist envisioning of paradise and the means necessary to upkeep it becomes all the more dystopic. The contrast between this isolated paradise and the arid outside environment further enhances the ironies of the persistence of the recovery narrative.

The first visual description of the environment outside is given soon after the initial account of the arcology and also focalized by Angel. Angel is in a helicopter flying over the desert and once again regarding the land below: "Original landscape: Old Testament ancient. Creosote bushes. Joshua trees, spiky and lonely. Yucca eruptions, dry washes, pale gravel sands, quartz pebbles. The desert was entirely black now and cooling, the scalpel scrape of the sun finally off the land" (11). The contrast and almost oppositional nature of the environments is immediate, made apparent to the reader. Starkly different from the arcology, which is portrayed as the colorful, lush habitat for human leisure, the desert is uninviting in its brutality, heightened through its muted color scheme. The desert is harsh, an already challenging environment further exacerbated by the climate change-induced "Big Daddy Drought" (9). Furthermore, unlike in the previously discussed excerpt of sunlight delicately sifting through Cypress 1's plant life, the sun outside is likened to a knife and its absence a mercy. As a habitat, the outside is immediately framed as a foil to the arcology. The antithesis of these manmade environments, the one outside of its regulated climate, is characterized by violence and instability.

By framing the desert as a wasteland originating from the Old Testament, Bacigalupi strengthens the association with the recovery narrative by casting the arcology as humanity's ultimate technology-enabled solution. Humanity, banished from the garden, has at last attained their technology-enabled paradise. Anchored within a capitalist mentality, however, escape from the brutal Old Testament landscape is only available to higher tiers of society. The contrast between the two co-existing habitats hence highlights the social inequalities presented in the novel. The discrepancy between the enchanted dewy techno-Eden and the skin-blistering, parched desert immediately outside build a sense of irony. Pérez Ramos points out that though they have a "low environmental impact" and have the "potential for improving quality of life", their function is to provide these things for "the

wealthiest and most powerful" few, "highlighting prevalent power structures that ultimately foster eco-apartheids" (Pérez Ramos 2016, 54). Here, the technologically recovered Eden gains another layer of irony as it excludes those who are not victors within a capitalist order in the same way as it keeps out unpleasant or unruly aspects of the material reality outside of it.

By having these two drastically different ecosystems side by side, with a mere wall to separate them, the inaccuracy of age-old assertions of a balance of nature is made apparent. The idea of a balanced nature is one of the foundational, ancient myths (Botkin, xvi), a belief that nature has the "inherent ability to maintain itself in a state of equilibrium, to heal itself when injured" (Sale 2011, 169). An idea that goes back at least to Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, which eventually fused with Judeo-Christian ideology, nature is considered perfect and logical in its makeup like its divine creator. This assumption is still prevalent in "Western society", providing the basis for our assumption of nature as a homeostatic system (Sale 2011, 169). The setting of *The Water Knife* is explicitly described as breaking away from this belief of equilibrium, and I see this juxtaposition as a method to heighten a sense of anxiety and break these mythic nature assumptions.

As mentioned in the synopsis, a journalist and someone who has decided to stay in Phoenix despite her privileged possibility to leave whenever she pleases, Lucy tends to provide the most objective consideration of the setting in comparison to the two other protagonists. Her focalization tends to also be more socio-ecologically critical, which is why the majority of the analytical contemplation on these matters originates from her. In Chapter 5, Lucy reflects on the current environmental state of affairs, describing it as a shift in balance: "Everything died…The equilibrium of the world was shifting. Whole cities were losing their balance as the ground they'd taken for bedrock shifted beneath them and knocked them right on their collective asses" (86). Once again tying the ecological flux to the instability of the ground, the shift in tone towards the end of the excerpt, from being rather poetic to a blunt and lurid one, heightens the farcical nature of the situation. The likelihood of their survival due to the unpredictably worsening ecological forecast is placed at odds with the ignorantly blissful, Edenic existence of the ones with the means.

The tension between the juxtaposed arcology and the city of Phoenix brings with it ironic undertones. Hyper-divergent from one another, the two environments highlight the absurdity of ignoring and working around environmental change to maintain a sense of control and balance instead of acknowledging its complexity. The origin of the recovery narrative is even brought up directly in the novel as Maria, one of the protagonists, has a conversation with a hydrologist. In this excerpt, he describes Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* (1986), a book that foretold that the water management practices of the American West are "unsustainable and doomed to fail" (Pérez Ramos 2016, 48), as

"the bible when it comes to water", clarifying this association by saying that it is the "Old Testament. The beginning of everything. When we thought we could make deserts bloom, and the water would always be there for us. When we thought we could move rivers and control water instead of it controlling us" (Bacigalupi 2015, 219). Here, the belief in an ability to control the environment is explicitly tied to biblical assertions about the land.

The vicious socio-ecological impacts of water scarcity in some parts of the United States coupled with its irresponsible consumption is a conversation Bacigalupi has knowingly engaged in, and he has discussed the aim of his novel in interviews. Because climate fiction is written to conjure outrage and mobilize people over climate change, I feel his thoughts add gravity to my interpretation. Pondering what the arcologies represent in *The Water Knife*, Bacigalupi sees them as the wrong technological band-aid to a deep-seated approach people have towards climate change and the environment. In a 2015 interview, he considers arcologies to be "a symptom of a problem, which is the moment that humanity accepts that the world outside is no longer an inviting and supportive and sustaining place for people" (Calvert, 2015). Instead of taking concrete action to mitigate climate change, creating an Edenic enclosure for the ones who can afford it speaks of an apathy in regards to climate change, not a solution to it. Moreover, as he reflects over his intent with the novel, Bacigalupi states that he is interested in contrasting the outcomes of people who have different approaches to their existence. Here, he differentiates between "reality-based people" and people who "live inside of nostalgia and live inside of denial about their present moment" (Calvert, 2015), stating that the former are better at surviving. This further invites us to consider the thematic importance of the tension between the speculative material reality and the American myth. Bacigalupi differentiates between those who face the reality around them and those who nostalgically cling to the past or a mythic idea of the past.

The contention between the reality of the environment and the Edenic projections is even more at the forefront of *The Road* as the American environment is entirely altered into a dusty wastescape. Despite the apocalyptic demise of the environment, Eden is persistently present throughout the story. In *The Road,* the recreation of an Edenic environment is even more remote, only occurring in the man's dreams, fleeting memories, and in the mention of absences.

3.1.2 Eden in *The Road*

Unlike in *The Water Knife*, an Edenic paradise is not physically manifest in McCarthy's work. It is, however, present and functions as a contrast to the now post-apocalyptic environment to illuminate

ironies. The myth of the Garden exists in the man's memories and dreams of the vanishing world. Less overtly, nature in its former glory is described through its absence. Set in the post-apocalypse, the tone and relationship to the environment differs drastically from Bacigalupi's work, in which society still stands and attempts to ensure human survival in the impending, devastating eco-disaster. Somber, *The Road*'s Eden does not represent a type of survival as it does in Bacigalupi's work. Rather than symbolizing a sanctuary, references to the garden serve as reminders of death, both of the protagonists and that of the biosphere.

As in *The Water Knife,* McCarthy's novel awakens a sense of discordance in the reader as they encounter an entirely unfamiliar world that is focalized by someone reading it through the American mythology he has internalized before the apocalyptic event. In his well-cited work exploring the development of one of the foundational tropes of America, the Myth of the Frontier, Richard Slotkin recognizes myth as an "an intellectual or artistic construct" between mind and affairs or between dream and reality (Slotkin 1973, 7). This interface-function plays out in *The Road,* as the man negotiates with his mythological impulses and the material realities of an inhospitable, alien landscape.

Indeed, this is echoed by Ben De Bruyn who has also discussed the importance of the myth of Eden in understanding the novel's message, "[t]he image of the garden frequently returns to provide a poignant counterpoint to the bleak wastes of post-apocalyptic reality" (De Bruyn, 2010). In other words, dreams project Edenic fantasies that the American environment can no longer yield to. Tim Edwards also discusses this in his analysis, remarking that "McCarthy's novel as a whole accomplishes: a juxtaposing of a seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present" (Edwards 2008, 58). As with *The Water Knife,* the idyllic Eden is a point of contrast to the outside environment, making the punch of the post-apocalypse all the more harrowing.

The picturesque plentifulness of the former world, or, more accurately, the mythic expectations of it, is most overtly drawn on in the man's dreams. As Edwards remarks, it is significant that most of the man's dreams and memories are pastoral (Edwards 2008, 58). These memories of green pastures and romantic ideals, reflecting the myths of the pre-apocalyptic world, are, however, not a source of hope or aspiration. Rather, they are presented as the antagonist of the protagonists' survival, a reminder of their hopelessness in the American environment. Despite living in constant fear of death, the man's dreams are almost overwhelmingly idyllic. In comparison to the bleak descriptions, a landscape described by the boy as "[n]othing" (7), the dreams are strikingly vivid, a break from the grey monotony of their surroundings. The movement between his dream world and the environment is encapsulated in "[i]n the nights sometimes now he'd wake in the black and freezing waste out of

softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun" (292). These brief moments of color are few and far between, emphasizing their significance when they do appear in the text.

Though their circumstances are dire and the measures they take to survive largely propel the action, the internal conflict brought on by the discrepancy between the man's dream world and the physical setting is thematically central to the novel. The man's dreams constantly remind the reader of the world he has lost, and the dreams carry this sense of bitter sweetness within them: "Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory." (17) Notably, the dream sequences are more internally focalized than the rest of the narration, involving the senses and reflecting a strong emotional response. To give a point of comparison, on the previous page, the man and boy find a ham, which is a rare, delicious find in comparison to most of their scavenging. The description accompanying it is, however, focally distant and uninvolved: "Deep red and salty meat inside. Rich and good" (16). The description of the meat feels laconic in comparison to the emotional evocation brought on by the memory of peach, a poetic longing for both the lost vibrancy of the environment and the forgetting of it.

The focalization shift enhances the sensory impact of the dream portions, emphasizing the gargantuan discrepancy between the post-apocalyptic environment and the mythic longings that still lingers in the man's imagination and memory. Rather than providing hope or purpose, dreams, and daydreaming, are portrayed negatively as an escapist impulse and death wish. In most cases, the man chastises himself for his splendorous dreams. Pointing out that "he was learning how to wake himself" from the "siren worlds" of his dreams, he remarks that "the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death" (17). When a physical paradise does make an appearance, it comes in the form of a well-stocked bunker that the man and boy come across by sheer luck in a time of dire need. As with his dreams, the bunker, "this tiny paradise" (McCarthy 159), is met with a similar bittersweet appreciation. It is a momentary relief that nonetheless worsens the realization of their dreadful circumstance.

The act of naming, as Adam does in the Biblical myth of creation, is alluded to as the man relates what "richness of a vanished world" (147) he has discovered within the bunker to the boy: "Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets […] I found everything. Everything" (146). It is, however, not everything, and the listing of such a scarce number of items, and pinning them as "everything", only reminds the reader of the totality of the

environmental change. Adeline Johns-Putra echoes something similar in her analysis of the work, remarking that the "marvelous plentitude" within the bunker merely underscores the desolation outside (Johns-Putra 2016, 527). The significance of naming will be further discussed in my analysis chapter on dirt's agency in *The Road*.

As a cultural idea, Eden has come to represent its absence, as the environment carries with it no potential for its recovery. The man is afraid that the bunker will become to the child what the aspirations of paradise are to the man: "He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well […] Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge" (163). Johns-Putra beautifully encompasses the perpetual surrender to loss that the man is coming to terms with, noting that the past is invoked both in their conversations and the man's memory "only in order to know it is not there" (526). Loss is hence an ongoing process in the novel (Johns-Putra 2016, 527). This idea brings us to the use of the pastoral style to play with projections of an idyllic landscape only to then deconstruct them, as I will show in my analysis chapter on *The Road*.

In her consideration of the novel, Carole Juge acknowledges the conflict between the man's dreams and reality, seeing this as a "persistent rivalry" throughout the work (Juge 2009, 21). The man can no longer look to the script of the recovery narrative in understanding his environment, and the push and pull of coming to terms with this reality is heightened through allusions to American pastoralism. Undoing the environment by stylistically drawing on the pastoralist tradition and with indirect allusions to Eden hints at the significance of American mythology in understanding the novel as a whole.

As Edwards argues, the novel leans on an American pastoralist or "an almost Emersonian sense of Nature as sacred text" (Edwards 2008, 55), "both creat[ing] and destroy[ing] the world through language simultaneously" (59). Focusing on the novel's dialogue with the pastoral tradition, Edwards draws attention to its allusions to the biblical Eden and the myth of creation, considering the man to be "anti-Adam, who literally sees his world being uncreated before his eyes" (59). Presenting nature as a text coming undone along with its candid allusions to paradise, the narrator, focalizing through the man, constantly reinforces the absence of Eden, perhaps even constructing an anti-Eden, throughout the story. This is also remarked on by Johns-Putra who argues that the pastoral is drawn on "not to inspire its narrative with possibility but to haunt it with loss" (Johns-Putra 526). This perverse undoing of the biosphere is coupled with the previously discussed Edenic projections, highlighting the irony of myth's persistence in the man's imagination regardless of the immense loss.

Following one of the man's more Edenic dreams in which his "pale bride [comes] to him out of a green and leafy canopy" (17), there is a brief account of the setting that, according to Edwards, aptly condenses or "rehearses in miniature what McCarthy's novel as a whole accomplishes" (Edwards 58): "In the morning it was snowing again. Beads of small gray ice strung along lightwires overhead" (McCarthy 2006, 17). The constant flux between descriptions that adhere to the pastoral tradition to entirely break away from its expectation of winter wonderlands or lush pastures is repeated throughout the novel. Edwards argues that, in order to destroy the world, McCarthy must simultaneously create it through language (59). McCarthy must remind the reader of the landscape's former richness to then depict its absence. Continuing this argument, the invoked American pastoralism builds on the myth of the garden. The images and landscapes that McCarthy draws on only to unravel are ones that are familiar to the reader, because the myth and the accompanying tradition of pastoralism are such a staple of the American imagination. Indeed, the mythological and material dimensions of the world, the past and the present, are constantly side-by-side in the text, shaping each other.

While *The Water Knife* has overly been constructed to inspire climate action, *The Road* is more ambiguous with its intensions. Regardless, as Edwards remarks, the novel does come across as a warning of the frailty of earth (Edwards 2008, 60). Though perhaps not a climate change novel, Edwards puts forth that *The Road* serves as a type of warning to its readers of how the world "once lost, cannot be recovered" (60).

3.2 Settlers and the frontier mentality in the apocalypse

One of the most persuasive myths in America that ties into this recovery mentality is the American frontier. A rhetorical staple throughout American history, the frontier is a concept central to the American expansionist impulse. Richard Slotkin, a historian and prominent scholar in American studies, has written a number of books on the historical significance of the frontier myth in the American cultural imagination. In defining what the frontier is, he states that, though its significance is now mythological, it was once a material existence "that shaped the behavior and the ideas of colonists and pioneers" (Slotkin 1985, 15). Tying with the broader Judeo-Christian Edenic discourse, through the history of frontier development, the frontier was sold to its prospective settlers and investors using the language of mythology; they were encouraged to view the American land as a "Garden of Eden to be settled by men forewarned of serpents" with inexhaustible riches and restorative powers (Slotkin 1985, 39). Indeed, the ideological foundations of the frontier myth are the

same as that of capitalist competition and social Darwinism, having informed the "dominant historiographical tradition and political ideology" of America (Slotkin 1985, 15). Though primarily focusing on Western film rhetoric and its impact, Janic Hocker Rushing goes as far as to say that "[t]he story of American's westward movement and settlement, in its various manifestations, is the most enduring and characteristic American myth" (Rushing 1983, 15).

In the novels, drawing on the myth of the frontier is hence no accident. As is the case with climate fiction, the works, however, challenge and rework the myth and its accompanying ideologies. The driving force behind this myth is a sturdy belief in human expansion and progress, and its main character is an ideal American who "[has] defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege" (Slotkin 1992, 11). Climate change, however, challenges these culturally propagated assertions of human mastery over the American West, exposing the material complexity of the region. The American West offers a fertile ground for a discussion of more-than-human agencies, because, as scholar Sylvan Goldberg notes, the Western environment is particularly prone to the environmental unpredictability brought on the Anthropocene, the area being acutely dependent on its infrastructure in order to be habitable (Goldberg 2018, 21). He adds that "attempts to define the western environment in material terms have often exposed an intransigent nonhuman world appealing precisely for its resistances to human hubris and its evocation of human precarity: aridity, and water rights in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Phoenix" (Goldberg 2018, 24). The environment of the West is by nature at odds with human conquest and, hence, with the protagonist of the American frontier.

Both novels further draw on the stronghold of recovery myth in the American context by referencing early European migration. These religiously motivated colonizers headed to the Americas in hopes of discovering a so-called New Eden. The subjects of the recovery myth, early European colonizer play a central role in the American imagination. Much like the environments presented in the novels differ from the idealized Edenic landscape encompassed in the recovery narrative, the humans are juxtaposed with early European migrants who heavy-handedly propagated the idea of Edenic recovery in America. In the following sections, I consider how these references to settlers and the frontier are used in the two novels.

3.2.1 *The Water Knife*

The frontier is explicitly mentioned early on in the novel through a mention of early settlers. In the beginning of the second chapter, focalization shifts to Lucy Monroe, as she is waking up to the sound

of rain, half-dreaming, only to realize that, in reality, it is a dust storm hammering at her house (Bacigalupi 2015, 23). Lucy provides some of the more critical interpretations of the societal and ecological prospects of Phoenix. The contrast to Angel's privileged experience in the modern Eden is stark, which is further emphasized through this direct allusion to the frontier. The reference brings the current state of affairs into a juxtaposition with the sense of belief in the elements harbored by early colonizers. Reminiscing about the water in her dream, she recalls the feel of the rain and its miraculousness: "Godwater, American settlers had once called it as they invaded slowly across the prairies of the Midwest and then pressed into the arid lands beyond the Rocky Mountains" (23). The harshness of the environment is contrasted with a sense of hope, the effect an almost painful realization of its lack.

The firm belief of early settlers in their God to sustain them on their journey is reflected upon, now contrasted with perpetual drought and Lucy's hopelessness: "In Lucy's dream it had been as gentle as a kiss…And now it was gone. Her lips were cracked and broken" (24). The highly tactile, embodied way Lucy's disillusionment with the environment is described, through the sensitive region of the lips, emphasizes the entangled relationship between her bodily experience and the land. She is fully dependent on the habitability of her environment, feeling its changes directly on her skin. Though the settlers, too, encountered a harsh land, they were driven by not only the promise of a divine power's anointment but that of opportunity and discovery. Unlike them, Lucy's dreams present her with a place of bodily salvation, but her physical reality no longer reflects the opportunities sought by early settlers.

The fact that *The Water Knife* is set in the Southwest already in itself brings with it a strong association with Western movement and settlement. The American West and its accompanying frontier mentality are central in American history, offering a "white, settler, masculine, agricultural" account of national progress, as Sylvan Goldberg points out (Goldberg, 21-22). Additionally, the conversation between the frontier mentality and the limited realities of social and physical mobility in Phoenix is continued through the character of Maria. Maria's cynicism is juxtaposed with her father's American idealism. The discrepancy between Maria and her father is condensed in the metaphor of the map: "He was an old man, she realized…Living according to an ancient map of the world that no longer existed. He kept saying that this was America and America was all about freedom and doing what you wanted, but the crumbling America that they drove across…most definitely wasn't the America he kept inside his head" (49). A former farmer displaced due to the drastic change in climate, Maria equates his value system with the myths of the landscape, both long outdated. Talking about the moral values reflected in cartography, Amy DeRogatis states that maps tell less about precise representation of the landscape and are instead "always interpretive tools" that reflect the hopes and wants of the culture

producing them (DeRogatis 2003, 24). This metaphor, hence, represents the culturally bound hopes of her father, outdated and still reflecting the American settler mentality.

In regards to American frontier history, the novel draws on what Goldberg considers something "New Western and environmental historians have by now long shown" (24). "[t]he frontier narrative often effaced the environmental harm resulting from the exploitation and management of natural resources central to the idealized West…and whose material limits have shaped cultural and political struggles over conservation, preservation, and, more recently, climate change." (24) The frontier narrative-facilitated effacement of material realities that Goldberg refers to is something that Bacigalupi draws the reader's attention to again and again. In the novel, however, the frontier narrative can no longer eclipse the material devastation and climate change experienced in the area. As I show in my analysis chapter on *The Water Knife,* dust in the Southwestern environment plays a crucial role in overthrowing the persistent frontier mentality.

3.2.2 *The Road*

The map is also a prominent metaphor in *The Road,* with the protagonists witnessing the slow disintegration of their map as they venture through the apocalyptic landscape. Symbolically, the gradual rotting of the map (209) implies a loss of a sense of place, or, as scholar Inger-Anne Søfting writes, "when everything has been laid waste, place is no longer a vehicle of cultural specificity" with cultural or natural distinction (Søfting 2013, 706). With the vague knowledge that the novel is set somewhere in the United States, the obscuring of place becomes even more meaningful.

In the case of Cormac McCarthy's fiction, there has been an insistence on reading *The Road* as part of the American Southwestern literary tradition; however, Ibarrola-Armendariz emphasizes how McCarthy also estranges the reader while referring to the history of the region (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2011). Place, however, has a strong cultural meaning throughout American history, which makes placeless setting of McCarthy's story meaningful on its own. A number of scholars have considered the significance of place and the frontier in the novel.

Walsh sets out to demonstrate how the work revives the American myth of the frontier. Showing how McCarthy revives the American mythic and imaginative construction characteristic to Southern literature with his novel, Walsh discusses how the novel "reclaims a sense of mythic space for Southern and American literature, especially with regard to his inscription of the myth of the frontier" (Walsh 2008, 48). Employing all the hallmarks of an American mythic narrative, with the Other, the cannibals terrorizing the terrain, contrasted with the man and the boy treading an unfamiliar landscape

towards the prospect of salvation (49), the novel frames the South as a "physical frontier and goal, but also as an imaginative refuge" (53). Additionally, Walsh makes the claim that, unlike McCarthy's other works which move from a mythic limitless space to a sense of confinement, *The Road* "[s]omewhat ironically perhaps" reverses this following apocalyptic disaster (49).

Placing *The Road* in the context of new capitalism, Simon Schleusener looks to the centrality of the road motif, symbolically significant in the American literary tradition (Schleusener 2017). He recognizes the cultural importance of mobility and the frontier in American history, considering how "mobility has lost all implications of transgression, discover, and the pleasure of flight" in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic imaginary. Contrary to its use in American cultural discourse, the road, a symbol of mobility, serves the purely functional role in *The Road* of providing the "only route…in a devastated and decaying environment marked by lethal violence and destruction", as Schleusener points out (Schleusener 2017). Discovery, so mythical central to the American cultural imagination, is impossible in as the earth "seems to be in a state of complete decay, having lost most of its resources and potentials" (Schleusener 2017). Indeed, this disappearance of the biosphere's potential draws the reader's attention to the material limitations of the frontier impulse. Described by Véronique Bragard as a "wastescape", nature no longer produces the sustenance and other resources necessary for human survival (Bragard 2013, 479).

In a more overt reference to the mythical frontier, the text directly refers to America's colonial past by describing the man and the boy as well as the dead they encounter on their route south as pilgrims. Elaborating on the dialectics of migration in McCarthy's novel, Carl F. Miller briefly expands upon the thematic importance of religion in *The Road'*s discussion of migration. He states that "[e]ven more pertinent to the subject of migration, these repeated references to pilgrims and the pilgrimage stand in ironic contrast to the inevitable plight of its characters" (Miller 2012); however, Miller does not expand upon these ironic tensions. Within the American context, the word "pilgrim" is rather loaded and carries with it strong associations to European settlement and its catastrophic impacts to the indigenous peoples of the continent as well as the ecological decline of the continent. In the novel, the term "pilgrim" itself is a mythical extension of sorts to early European migration to America. Among the first people to arrive from Europe to the area, the Pilgrims and Puritans are two distinct religious movements; these two terms are, however, often used synonymously (Paul 2014, 137-138). There is overlap between their beliefs, and ideas from both groups lay the basis for subsequent American mythology. Of Biblical origins, the word "pilgrim is used in Hebrews 11:13; Israel's patriarchs are said to have called themselves "'strangers and pilgrims' on earth" (*The King James Version,* Heb. 11:13). Indeed, the narrative of early migration to the American continent is connected to the biblical narrative of the flight of Jews to the Promised Land (Paul 2014, 139). It is hence no

surprise that the term is popularly used when referring to all "early English migrants to New England" (Hardman Moore 2007, 148).

The narrative of the Pilgrims begins with their need to relocate due to discrimination in England for their religious beliefs (Paul 2014, 144). They viewed the American continent as a new Promised Land, a place given to them by God, which justified the displacement and murder of its indigenous peoples (Paul 2014, 146). Additionally, they viewed the land as a place of potential prosperity through human labor, a wilderness that should be possessed and mastered by the human (Gatta 2004, 19-21). In *The Road*, the use of "pilgrim" draws on these layers of history and myth, revealing an ironic tension.

The word "pilgrim" initially occurs on the very first page almost as if to orientate the reader into this storyworld that so crudely deviates from the environment conjured up in American mythologies. Given the term's resonance with images of plentiful land and discovery in the American context, its occurrence seems almost misplaced. The novel opens with the man awaking in the forest from a dream where he and the boy are walking in a cave:

> Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. (McCarthy 2006, 1)

This early passage gives the reader crucial information about the mythical context and the material order of *The Road*'s setting. With little exposition provided by this point in the novel, the dream serves as a symbolic induction into the storyworld. The simile, likening the characters to pilgrims, is deliberate and significant; conjuring up the American mythos, the contrast between the image of the limitless, lush frontier and the confines of a cave is claustrophobic and sobering. The frontier past was driven by the ideal of progress, both in a geographical and societal sense, with God's providence. In *The Road,* instead of being posited as the conquerors of this realm, these pilgrims are engulfed by it, "wander[ing]" directionless. Though heavily symbolic, the passage illuminates the emergence of more-than-human agency, in the form of earth and water, perhaps as a result of the environment's alienness from our traditional understanding of nature.

Even in this short excerpt, we have two instances of more-than-human agency. The cave itself is personified as the two characters are described as being swallowed by this "granite beast", an instant of active confinement. Additionally, the water is one of the only contributors to the sensual experience and the sole source of sound in the silence. Its dripping is described as song and a metric for a time seemingly oblivious to the human. The man and boy are engulfed by a vibrant, more-than-human

order, which in no way resembles the mythical New World imagined by the Puritans and Pilgrims. A symbolic reference to the novel's environment, the cave, entirely natural but simultaneously devoid of the hallmarks of what humans understand as nature, serves as a place for challenging these mythological expectations. The remaining references to pilgrimage further echo this.

Previously anchored to a mission fueled by their belief in God, they now wander aimlessly. Referring to the shriveled dead people the protagonists encounter in Rock City on their southward journey, "[t]hey were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen" (McCarthy 2006, 23-24). The use of the rather antiquated "discalced", an adjective mainly used "with reference to certain strict orders of Catholic friars or nuns whose members go barefoot or are shod only in sandals" (OED Online 2018), anchors their pilgrimage to a sense of irony. They have been robbed of their shoes after death, their pilgrimage seemingly into nothingness.

In later occurrences of "pilgrim", it continues to be used ironically to highlight the tension between its mythological dimensions and the brutal realities these wanderers meet at the dawn of the world in apocalypse. This is particularly apparent through pairing "pilgrims [sinking] down and [falling] over and [dying]" with perpetual, more-than-human cycles and processes, the "earth [going] on trundling past the sun]" (193). Additionally, their journey is described as leading to their demise, "pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths" (213), giving the use of the term an almost oxymoronic sense. A pilgrimage, especially in a religious context, is generally linked with a specific destination of immense significance. Nothing seems to be sanctified in this apocalyptic world, but everyone seems to have an imperative until the end, as the use of the term pilgrim implies. This adds to the contradictory nature of the old man Ely's words when the man quizzes him about existence: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (181). Everyone's desire to seek meaning through religion and myth seems at odds with the reality unfolding in front of them, but this clinging to meaning still entirely justified.

3.3 Chapter conclusion

The (post-)apocalyptic setting presented in Bacigalupi's and McCarthy's work is placed at odds with the foundational narrative that pushed pious European migrants into the continent in the first place and then was later used to justify the push west, the displacement and genocide of native peoples, and the agricultural alteration of the environment. Climate fiction reorders the way we make sense of our world. Looking to the recovery narrative, its idealized environment symbolized by Eden and the subject of the New World, the settler, the novels invoke almost a sense of irony of the clear

inconsistency between the cultural and environmental heritage of America and the environment of the novels. The conflict between the fantastical expectations of an Edenic environment and the material realities in the novels highlights the agency of more-than-human entities.

Mythology fundamentally informing our attitudes on our environments, these climate fiction novels offer an opportunity to inspect our underlying attitudes towards the more-than-human. The root of the recovery narrative and its accompanying Garden of Eden myth is the want for control, and William Leiss considers this human desire to master nature in his 1994 work. Contemplating the basis of this desire to dominate, he summarizes that "the effort to master and control nature has an essential connection with the modern utopian vision" and is realized through technological means (Leiss 1994, 15). As he looks to the Judeo-Christian roots of nature mastery, he makes an observation related to the divergence of a Judeo-Christian outlook on nature in comparison to that of dominant religions of the ancient world. The distinction between them is that "[t]he Judaeo-Christian religion…maintained that 'spirit' was separate from nature and ruled over it from without...Only man of all earthly things possessed spirit, and thus he did not have to fear the resistance of an opposing will in nature" (30).

Recognizing more-than-human agency and our embeddedness in our surroundings, however, "compel[s] an ethical rethinking of our behaviors", Estok suggests (137). Similarly, in her reading of *The Road,* Véronique Bragard suggests that the "apocalyptic imagination" has a reformative agenda for humanity's relationship with nature and additionally calls for "a groundbreaking relationship with waste and matter" (Bragard 2013). Preoccupied with exploring a non-anthropocentric approach to matter, new materialist scholars Jane Bennett and Stacy Alaimo argue that the promotion of "the vitality of matter" counters the idea of matter as "dead or thoroughly instrumentalised", which in turn has fueled our anthropocentric fancies and "our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (Bennett 2009, ix; Alaimo 2014, 193). In the next chapters, I build on these ideas by suggesting that *The Water Knife* and *The Road,* as fiction dealing with climate change, build a relationship with dirt that transforms how matter and nature are conceptualized.

4. *The Road* and Agentic Dirt

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how *The Road* and *The Water Knife* reference and build on the recovery narrative, highlighting its irony in their apocalyptic settings. Next, I want to dive deeper and explore how dirt brings the conflict between American expectations of nature and the material realities of the environment to the forefront. Drawing on Heather I. Sullivan's dirt theory, my

argument is that dirt is a vibrant agent in both novels, an important element in the settings that shapes the characters' experiences of their surroundings and, ultimately, challenges the preconceived dichotomy between nature and the human. As already discussed in the theoretical chapter, by looking at the works through a material ecocritical perspective, I consider the more-than-human to have agency as much as the human subjects do. As dirt is a prominent material in the works, I want to explore its agentic potency, looking to dirt theory for a theoretical frame, as it is preoccupied with the significance of dirt in reworking the way we approach our environments. Dirt theory, Sullivan argues, serves as "an antidote" to our nostalgic tendency to view nature as a distant and uncontaminated place separate from ourselves to demonstrate that a boundary between the human and nature does not exist in fact (Sullivan 2012, 515). Dirt is pivotal in breaking the expectations of nature as epitomized in the recovery narrative. This is particularly evident in *The Road,* I argue.

Instead of presenting a recoverable element, malleable for human profit, the dirt challenges these nature attitudes by revealing ecological complexities, unpredictability, and dissolving the putative human/more-than-human boundaries. Tying the novel to the recovery narrative, McCarthy essentially constructs its antithesis.

Summarizing the important themes of *The Road*, E. Ann Kaplan emphasizes the potent way McCarthy wields metaphor and language to convey "the tragic degradation of humanity that works in tandem with the loss of harmony with nature" (Kaplan 2016, 57). As this loss of harmony is thematically significant, considering what role dirt plays in this through the frame of dirt theory becomes even more compelling. To demonstrate how dirt challenges nature expectations in *The Road*, I pay particular attention to how dirt is portrayed in the setting and the interactions between the characters, the setting, and dirt in my close reading. Building on the observations made in the first analysis chapter, I begin by considering the materiality of the dirt in the work, which comes in the form of ash. After this, I reflect on the explicit ways that dirt impacts the environment by analyzing how McCarthy employs the pastoral style to break its idyllic conventions, demonstrating how dirt impacts the environment by altering it and making it unpredictable. Finally, I look at how dirt affects the humans' bodily experience of the environment.

4.1 Dirt modifying the environment

Though McCarthy offers little information about the apocalyptic event aside from "[t]he clock stopp[ing] at 1:17", accompanied by "[a] long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (54), scholars have been preoccupied with identifying its cause. Some critics have argued that *The*

Road portrays a nuclear winter (Lincoln 2009, 48; Edwards 2008, 56) while some have suggested a meteor strike as the cause (Hermanson 2017, 3; Thiess 2013, 532). Regardless of the cataclysm's origin, a significant underlying theme is the characters' negotiation with changing climate and its consequences. Whether intentional on the author's part or not, ash changes the way nature is approached in the novel as it perpetuates environmental change in the setting. By doing so, it challenges the way the environment is conceptualized. Before considering the modifying effects of ash in the setting, I want to first briefly consider ash as a matter, both metaphorically, mythically and materially.

4.1.1 Ash as a material

Unlike in *The Water Knife*, where the dispersed dirt throughout the setting is soil from the surface of the earth, the particulate in *The Road* is the cataclysmically disintegrated biosphere. Ash is not soil as obviously as dust and therefore its analysis in terms of humanity's relationship with the land, as posited by the recovery narrative, could be questioned. As I am interested in the way dirty soil diverges from concepts of nature, how can my reading remain coherent by taking ash as the primary dirt in *The Road?*

Taking the biblical story of creation as the starting point, the recovery narrative suggests that everything, from Adam to the fauna and flora, is a product of earth. God fashions the animals and the first man from dust, and after the Fall, God states that Adam will return to the same ground that he was created from after death (Merchant 16). Faced with the end of the world, the ash that dominates the setting carries the mythical implication that humanity is once again morphing into its source. The ash is metaphorically potent and represents this final state of unravelling.

Thinking about its material properties, ash can have a detrimental impact on an environment. To demonstrate some of the agentic properties of ash in the environment, the ecologically modifying nature of magma and silicate fragments from supervolcanos, matter known as tephra (Ayris and Delmelle 2012, 1905), is an illuminating access point. Large quantities of tephra from a supervolcanic eruption can alter the physical properties of the atmosphere by absorbing and scattering radiation, which is followed by a plummet in surface temperatures in the area where the ash is airborne (Ayris and Delmelle 2012, 1912). In terms of its impact on plant life, vegetation buried in a heavy deposit of tephra may not survive. Scientists debating the effects of a volcanic eruption, for example, discuss the burial depth impacting both plants' ability to photosynthesize and their access to oxygen (Arnalds 2013). Naturally, the above description is a crude oversimplification of the many ways tephra can

affect an environment, and my aim is not to give a scientifically accurate account of this speculative setting. However, it highlights just how dramatically ash can impact biological processes necessary for vegetation to thrive. In the speculative world of *The Road*, the ash has entirely permeated the atmosphere, a blanket of dirt settled over the landscape.

In light of the material properties of ash, it becomes evident that its impact on the storyworld is substantial. Though Sean Hermanson does make an argument that the amount of sunlight present towards the end of novel would be sufficient for photosynthesis to occur (Hermanson 2017), the novel nonetheless presents a world where ash actively obstructs necessary processes for vegetation to thrive. Whether or not plant life could regenerate does not take away from the thematic implications of a setting already undeniably altered by dirt. Contrary to the recovery narrative that postulates that humanity can rebuild a paradise through control of their environment, the reader is presented with material, climate-altering factors that cannot be solved by human means.

The agency of dirt is made apparent early on, in the very second sentence. McCarthy begins the story by giving two crucial aspects of the altered environment that differentiate it from the landscapes we are used to: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before" (McCarthy 2006, 1) The first feature, the inability to see celestial objects, hints at the alarming scarcity of light. As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that the atmosphere, thick with dirt, blocks sunlight from reaching the surface of the earth and hence inhibits the growth of plant life.

4.1.2 Ash as a modifier

The most obvious manifestation of the modifying effects of dirt is communicated to the reader through the novel's landscape imagery, which is littered through and through with allusions to American pastoralism and its conventions. In the first analysis chapter, I considered how the writing style alludes to an Emersonian nature (Edwards 2008, 55), constructing the image of a pristine wilderness in order to deconstruct it.

In the novel, plant life is discussed mostly through its absence or peculiarity in respect to a normative idea of nature. Counterintuitively at first, the novel contains an abundance of landscape descriptions in an almost pastoral style. Throughout the pastoral tradition's history, writers have framed nature as "a retreat or sanctuary, as Arcadian garden or wilderness refuge" (Scheese 2002, 4). With pastoral descriptions, McCarthy summons the tranquility and sublimity of this tradition to then place the setting at odds with these fantasies of nature. A landscape description might begin with "[j]ust beyond the high gap in the mountains they stood and looked out over the great gulf to the south where the

country as far as they could see…," (13) creating an expectation for a scenic description, the onlooker's appraisal of its greenness, calmness, and vitality. Instead, however, the excerpt then plunges you into something entirely divergent by superposing chaos and bareness, with "…was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry though the waste" (13). The complete absence of pastoral tropes creates a shocking shift in the mood.

Scattered throughout, these faux-pastoral passages function to heighten a feeling of deficiency, an environment shorn of the signifiers of nature and replaced with its ashes. Utilizing the pastoral counterpoint accentuates just how total the environmental impact of the cataclysm has been. As someone with a keen interest in the sciences (Hermanson 2017, 3), McCarthy is certainly aware of the ripple effects of such a planet-encompassing environmental alteration.

More than a backdrop, the dirt molds the ecosphere irreversibly, furthermore revealing the intricacies of the former ecosphere. The direct accounts of plant life are equally unlike the pastoral narrative as the former abundance of vegetation is present purely in its absence. Contrary to how "the pastoral envisions its green landscape as a site of eternal harmony and endless repeating cycles" (Sullivan 2015, 117), the vegetation of the setting is far from static and harmonious due to dirt. Accessing the novel through Heather I. Sullivan's concept of "dark pastoral", the "voice" of dirt is strengthened. In defining "dark pastoral", Sullivan states that she draws and builds on Timothy Morton's idea of dark ecology, which counters the traditional approach to nature as "an aesthetic and isolated site to visit or ignore", suggesting, rather, that we are all a part of a "physical, bodily inevitability as part of the 'mesh' of the world that includes us" (Sullivan 2015, 116). By drawing on the pastoral, McCarthy draws on our nostalgic views of nature as an aesthetic, harmonious site separate from the human to reveal their peculiarity in the face of this dynamic environment, which constantly molds and changes as it encounters complicated conjunctions of agency. This dynamism is particularly apparent through the plant life, which is described through the activity of breakdown, a complex dialogue between the ash and the ecosphere.

Whenever the surrounding vegetation is pointedly discussed, the reader's attention is drawn to its gradual dissolution, to the process of it also becoming dirt. The nutritional repercussions of this shift are self-evident; however, McCarthy extends this consideration to the more aesthetic, or otherwise not blatantly useful, aspects of the landscape. In this dirty environment, nature has ceased to be a commodity of beauty for the viewer's consumption. Instead, it is full of harrowing reminders of the fate of plant life, as" [c]harred and limbless trunks of trees" (6) are in the process "[falling] to dust about them" (4). I argue that by expanding to the aesthetics of the landscape instead of merely

focusing on the survivalist utility of their surroundings, McCarthy engages with the ideals related to the American landscape.

Tying this almost pastoral imagery with American mythology, the process of dissolution into ash carries a conversation with the Judeo-Christian creation story. In *The Road*, however, contrary to creation, everything is being recognized for the final time before dissolving into oblivion. The following excerpt is one stand-alone paragraph in the work, a strange invocation and lament over the ecological loss:

> The country went from pine to liveoak and pine. Magnolias. Trees dead as any. He picked up one of the heavy leaves and crushed it in his hand to powder and let the powder sift through his fingers. (McCarthy 2006, 209)

Here, McCarthy distills the protagonist's experience of the environment as it turns to ash before his very eyes. The man's mythic role as an anti-Adam, as Edwards calls him (59), is rather poignantly presented to the reader. The narrator begins by surveying the land, recognizing and naming the tree species, and consequently prompting the reader to imagine them in their animate form. After they are livened, the narrator, however, makes the demise of the ecosystem concrete by reminding the reader that the trees are dead. Furthermore, the dissolution of these once living trees in their rich habitat is hammered home through the image of the man literally turning a leaf into dust. The fact that the man has probably used the leaves to identify the trees further heightens the mythical sense that the man conducts the last instance of naming for the species. As he turns the leaf, an indexical sign for the tree itself, into dust, he unravels its unique characteristics, returning it into the dust from which it came. No one can use the leaf to identify the tree's species ever again.

In addition to highlighting the dissolution or the reversal of creation, naming is also used to illustrate the disruption of natural processes in this dirt-altered environment. As the man and the boy are at the brink of starvation, pillaging a garden shed in hopes of finding food, the man finds flower seeds: "Everything covered in ash...Packets of seed. Begonia. Morning glory" (140). The seed is a symbol of life and renewal, and here it merely serves as a reminder of the environment's resistance to these virtues. Described along with the ever-present covering of ash, the futility of the seeds in this apocalyptic world is remarked upon by the man. As "[h]e st[icks] them in his pocket", he wonders "[f]or what?" (140). Indeed, the soil is untillable and the sunlight is blocked by dirt. Even if these factors changed, there would be no pollinators, no ecosystem, to support their existence. Ash has disrupted the biosphere, and the potential of the seeds, a symbol of its renewal, is ever-suspended.

Aside from a dog and the inferable presence of some infection-causing micro-organisms, there is only one mention of a possibly animate, nonhuman organism. Disguised within the ash, the two stumble

upon “[a] small colony of [morels], shrunken and wrinkled” (40), which “[t]hey [pull]…from the ground, small alien looking things” (41) and consume soon after. Laura Wright read this as a sign of bettering conditions, an inkling of hope and virtue in the devastation. Wright optimistically states that the “existence of the mushrooms, edible vegetation that is somehow able to grow on the ruined earth, indicates the potential for a kind of survival that is not dependent on cannibalism” (Wright 2014). Delving deeper into understanding the morel as an organism, however, opens up an alternative reading to their presence. Firstly, their dehydrated appearance hints that they have simply died and dried in the ground they grew from; within the passage itself, there is no indication that they are still alive, much less actively growing. Additionally, the season-less climate also discourages a reading in which they signify that “there is cause for hope, even at the end of the world” (Wright 2014). Morels need separate seasons and “favor climates where there is a distinct winter followed by spring warmth” (Marley 2010, 39). Given the storyworld’s seasonal monotony, their growth is unlikely.

Moreover, a consideration of the interactions between plant species, climate, and dirt reveals further biological and thematic complexities in relation to the morels. Looking to the idea of storied matter, Joni Adamson uses the symbiotic relationship between trees and fungi as an example of organic, nonhuman life forms being semiotic; creating mutually beneficial interactions within forest soil, fungi and trees “employ a chemical vocabulary of nutrients” (Adamson, 255). Studies on the morel, a fungus that tends to be symbiotic with certain tree species, suggest that they are prompted to fruit heavily “as the tree is nearing death or in the years immediately following its death” or otherwise diseased or distressed; morels are often found at their most abundant a few years following a forest fire (Marley 2010, 38). In the light of their complex coexistence, the fruiting bodies collected by the protagonists are the output of a complex chemical dialogue, the trees expressing their distress over the abrupt ecological transformation either in the form of being turned into ash or accessing no sunlight as a result of the ashen haze. The plentiful occurrence of morels is a symptom of stress in their habitat as the trees react to their final moments of existence. This makes the characters’ encounter with them a reminder of both the intricacies of this (and any) ecosystem and the totality of the ecological demise. Looking at the environment through the lens of storied matter, the morels begin to look less like an emblem of hope or a promise of plentiful futures. The intervention of ash is no doubt detrimental to the species. Even if the ash was to slowly settle, the survival of the morels and the germination of the flower seeds would merely be temporary and unsustainable.

4.2 Dirt and unpredictability

In the previous section, I discussed the manner in which the agency of the ash manifests through its impact on biological processes necessary for the survival of animal and plant life, an environmental feature introduced already on the first page of the novel. A second characteristic of ash that is also revealed in the initial paragraph is the inconsistency of the environment: "the days more gray each one than what had gone before" (McCarthy 2006, 1). The dirt perpetuates change and, subsequently, makes one's surroundings more undecipherable. Alluded to by gradually greyer days, the rate and manner in which their environment is changing is impossible to predict as the dirt acts chaotically and erratically. The dirt thus represents disorder and obscures sense-making of one's surrounds.

A feature that adds to the unsettling nature of the storyworld is the constant descriptions of moving ash with little else mobile in the terrain. The juxtaposition of the stagnant "mummified dead everywhere" (23) and the "blowing ash" being "[t]he only thing that moved in the streets" (24) gives the reader a sense of disquiet in and of itself. The ash, however, also disrupts the protagonists' ability to identify threats and opportunities in their surroundings as well. Towards the end of the novel, the man becomes more delirious due to his illness and imminent death. Perhaps alluding to "the call of languor and of death" being accompanied by a loss of grip on reality (17), the man forgets the laws of their post-apocalyptic world. Attempting to convince the boy to enter a house with him, the man says that "[t]here's no one here...There are no tracks in the ash. Nothing disturbed" (225). The man applies his understanding of the foregone world, one where the environment operated in a uniform, decipherable way and could be read by its human inhabitants. The boy, however, reminds him of the vibrancy and deceptive nature of the ash, retorting "[t]racks dont stay in the ash. You said so yourself. The wind blows them away" (226). Here, the conflict between the foregone world expectation and the agency of dirt is explicitly remarked upon.

In addition to its constant movement, the ash makes the environment unpredictable by obscuring the protagonists' ability to make sense of their surroundings through various temporal divisions or units, such as the season or the month, as well as their geographical area. In the ash-altered environment, these tactics of deciphering one's environment no longer have as much meaning as in the pre-apocalypse world. In her article laying out dirt theory, Heather I. Sullivan states that there cannot be a focus on place or time with dirt theory as "dust, dirt, and sand are highly mobile aspects of our material surroundings" (Sullivan 2012, 516). Instead, dirt theory focuses on processes that are ongoing across time and space (516). Focusing on dirt in *The Road* brings the obscurity of time and place to the forefront.

Reflected in the very plot itself, which is simple and even monotonous (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2011, 6) the protagonists' experience is marked by temporal and spatial monotony. In the work, the narrator rarely considers the season or month. When the protagonist does speculates about the month of the year, however, he gives up in the next sentence: "[l]ate in the year. He hardly knew the month" (McCarthy 2006, 29), or "[s]o cold. It could be November. It could be later" (93). Much in the same way as discussed previously in naming the dead species around him, these references to time seem like relics that haunt him. As he has been accustomed to before the apocalypse, he attempts to make sense of his surroundings, only to realize the environment's resistance to these systems of organization.

Having attempted to keep a calendar and maintain this ritual of order, he has since given up: "He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years. They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here" (2). The fact that he no longer keeps a calendar hints at the total monotony he encounters. The calendar, marking the passage of time, has lost its significance. The man feels that the endeavor to keep track of time is futile in the ashen world and now solely relies on his reactive experience to direct him.

Though the time and the season are impossible and even unnecessary to know, place is consequential to the protagonists. Though place is not significant in the same way it was before the apocalyptic event, as it is "no longer a vehicle for cultural specificity" (Søfting 2013, 706), the two are hyper-aware of their course. They are determinedly making their way as south as possible for warmer weather (McCarthy 2006, 2). Unlike travelers before the apocalypse, the protagonists cannot, however, rely on the movement of the sun to help them navigate as "[t]he track of the dull sun [is moving] unseen beyond the murk" (13). The moon and stars, "somewhere beyond the ashen overcast" (122), are equally useless for navigation as becomes clear as the pair flees from a group of cannibals in the night. In this scene, the man recognizes that "[he has] no idea what direction they might have taken and his fear was that they circle and return to the house" (122). Here, the ash is in direct opposition with their survival, marking their experience of the environment as one of uncertainty over their fate. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of the road for the two, which serves as a compass for them through a landscape where nothing is reliable or uniform except the human-built remnants of highway. The "state roads" are their only tool for keeping course (43).

As the ash makes the environment difficult to read and age-old methods of navigation obsolete, they are reliant on the road and the scraps of map to orient themselves. As the novel progresses, however, the map they carry with them becomes increasingly difficult to read, with the "limp and rotting pages" (209) of the map in "sections", protected by a meager plastic bag (212). Its material disintegration

brings in a broader discussion of its metaphorical and mythical significance. Firstly, the map was previously a guide to a destination and a symbol of hope for the characters, taking them south towards the coast and their better chances of survival.

As Weiss points out, however, the map is a likeness of something no longer in existence. As an artifact, the map is a tool for contextualizing space and placing the viewer in it (Weiss 2012, 73), and the protagonists have been faithfully keeping to it and relying on its representation of the landscape for their survival. The discrepancy between the map's interpretation of the world and the material realities of the post-apocalyptic world is underscored to the reader in the heartbreaking moment when they finally reach the coast. Seeing the boy's disappointment, the man apologizes to him that the ocean is not blue (230). The boy expects the body of water to be splendidly blue as in the images of the map (Weiss 2010, 73). The ash, however, has discolored the ocean view, materially breaking the illusion of the world depicted in the map. Even the map is decomposing. As Weiss concludes, "the map is a dead cultural artifact, for there is no where to go, no place the map can show them" (Weiss 2010, 73).

Within the American context, the placelessness of the novel is unsettling. As an established "novelist of the American West" (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2011, 2), this disaccord with the greater canon of literature of the West is no doubt an intention on McCarthy's part. Weiss observes that, through references to the map, *The Road* draws on the same tradition of landscape and boundary as the novels of the West do (Weiss 2010, 71), playing off of its myths of the west. Previously culturally significant, cardinal points, specifically the west, no longer carry the promise of discovery and progress it once did. Distinguishing between the west and the east is of no utility for the characters of *The Road* as the only sensible direction is the south with its hypothetical promise of warmth.

Placing this all in the context of Judeo-Christian mythology, the loss of time and place, loss of division between night and day, or the west and the east, once again alludes to the reversal of creation. Scholars have previously made note of the similarities of *The Road* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (Hamilton 2017, 55). Discussing Samuel Beckett's *Endgame,* Susan Signe Morrison reflects on the setting of the play, observing that the light is described as grey, "[reverting] to the moment before God divided light from dark", codifying day and night (94). In the creation story, Morrison observes, order was divinely created out of waste (94), "[t]he earth…without form, and void" (*The King James Version,* Gen. 1:1) before God's divine intervention. With "everything gray in ash" (McCarthy, 95), the color is a marker of the dissolution of temporal codifiers, setting the novel in a timeless, dark void where order unravels into and is unraveled by the ash. The remnants of the former order, the calendar and the map, are no longer accurate reflections of the world.

The unpredictability brought on by the ash breaks from the assertion that humanity can master their environment. By making the progression of time ambiguous and the terrain monotonous, ash renders previously powerful symbols of control over the land, such as the map, borders, and the cardinal directions, void of their potency. Similarly, ash also contends with the very boundaries of the human body.

4.3 Dirt defying human/more-than-human boundaries

As discussed in the previous sections, the ash changes entire ecosystems by blocking the process of photosynthesis and suffocating most lifeforms. With these obstructions, the dirt contributes to the unbearable, cooling temperatures and the characters' gradual starvation. Moving from the environmental changes reflected by the dirt, I now look to the dissolving distinction between the human body and the environment propagated by the ash. Analyzing the body in the post-apocalyptic environment through the guise of dirt theory, dirt reveals the vulnerability of the human and challenges our separation of nature and the human. As Sullivan states, there cannot be any stable boundaries between dichotomous concepts like "clean and unclean, sanitary and unsanitary, or the pure and the dirty" when matter is constantly being reshaped (Sullivan 2012, 528). In this setting, where the biosphere has all but disintegrated, the instability of these boundaries becomes acutely obvious.

I am not the first to consider the significance of the changing environment and the human body in *The Road*. Mandy Chi Man Lo discusses the connection between the characters' bodies and the setting in her reading of *The Road*, stating that "the land and the human body are shown to be profoundly and intimately linked with each other" (Lo 2014, 70). She continues that "[t]he interdependence between land and the human body is…shown in the resemblance between the state of the landscape and the characters' conditions---the barrenness of the land and the exhaustion of the two protagonists, the darkness of the environment and the 'blindness' experienced by the people, the turmoil of the land and the confusion of the protagonists' location, as well as the 'godlessness' of the situation and the immoral practice of cannibalism" (Lo 2014, 70). Lo discusses the direct impact of the post-apocalyptic land and its dwindled resources on peoples' bodily experience with a focus on the resulting loss of societal order and morality. Though everything, including moral order, both affects and is impacted by the dirty environment, I consider dirt's more physiological and semiotic effects. As stated before, McCarthy's work tends to be read through the pretense of morality and ethics, and though Lo's reading is engaging, I want to explicitly distance my reading from this kind of moral objectivism. Rather, I focus on how the dirty environment defies a supposition of natural order as put

forth in the recovery narrative. As an aerosol, ash is penetrative and alters the affective experience of biological bodies as it is breathed in and consumed. Ash's intrusive nature in *The Road* makes the distinction between the human and more-than-human sphere all the more porous. This dichotomy is further unraveled through the very materiality of ash. Looking to the consistency of the dirt, it breaks dichotomous boundaries as it blurs the distinctions between different entities, both human and more-than-human.

4.3.1 Burnt biosphere

The dirt scattered throughout the environment is described as "[t]he ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void" (10). In other words, the ash is comprised of a myriad of organisms and substances disordered into undiscernible ash. It functions as a constant reminder of the disintegration of everything around them, formerly distinguishable and vivid. Now, the only vitality in their surroundings is the unidentifiable remains of things, whipped up by the more-than-human wind. Bleak and grey, the spatial setting is littered with the particulate of animals, plants, buildings, substances, and humans, all indistinguishable from one another: "They passed a metal trashdump where someone had once tried to burn bodies. The charred meat and bones under the damp ash might have been anonymous save for the shape of the skulls" (McCarthy 2006, 159). For a contemporary reader, the depravity of this passage is multifold. The combination of describing human remains as a mound of trash burned by a nameless "someone" serves as a reminder of the unraveling social order. Nothing is sacred. Particularly in Western modernity, we have been preoccupied by distancing our bodies from dirt in its many forms (Sullivan 2012), which makes the unrecognizability of the human body from the dirty environment anxiety inducing.

This material evades distinction between the species and materials it is composed of, and is instead faceless disorder. This also applies to the waste scattered throughout the environment, which muddies the boundaries of what is human and what is not: "The land was gullied and eroded and barren…Middens of anonymous trash" (McCarthy 2006, 189). The excerpt first paints an image of the landscape, which has been molded by more-than-human forces, water and wind. The narrator, however, does pay attention to the mounds of waste. More-than-human entities are acting upon the landscape while the only discernable landmarks are piles of human refuse, a monument to the past environmental impact of the human. This muddling of human and more-than-human features in the landscape creates a strange sense of blurring.

This anonymity is disturbing as it evades neat categorization, which culture so heavily relies on in sense-making. Though focusing on naming and unnaming in the novels of Raymond Queneau specifically, Jordan Stump makes some general observations about the significance of the human activity of naming. Stump identifies it as having a fundamental role in "our ability to comprehend the world around us", because through the act "we make our environment intelligible" by imposing structure upon it (Stump 1998, 8). Dissipated throughout the environment, the ash consists of everything from humans to plastics and resists codification. In her work *The Literature of Waste*, which deals with waste as both a material and as metaphor, Susan Signe Morrison expands on the importance of codification for the human experience in eradicating anxiety. Codifying things "facilitates the establishment of culture and civilization" and hence exerting control over them (Morrison 2015, 18). By naming things, we are able to classify them into comprehensible polarities, such as filthy or pure (24), or the human and more-than-human.

Alluding once again to the thematic centrality of the Garden of Eden in the novel, there is a clear tension between the act of naming and ash. The symbolic significance of naming is the imbalanced power dynamic it establishes as Adam, or man, is portrayed as having the authority to define and order nature, a power bestowed by God (Borkfelt 2011). The setting, however, resists this anthropocentric exertion of power by reducing all the nameable components into ash, which the man laments over:

> The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things to oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. (McCarthy 2006, 93)

As Stump puts it, a world without the categorization and differentiation brought on by names is one of chaos (Stump 1998, 9) as nothing has distinct, conceptual boundaries. Furthermore, I refer to an illuminating insight from Charles Parker Krieg on a different novel. Discussing Monique Roffey's *Archipelago,* Charles Parker Krieg relates why the depicted environmental catastrophe, a flood in Trinidad, is so disastrous for the characters affected by it. Reading the novel with a focus on the area's traumatic colonial history and cultural memory, the flood "seems to lack a connection to history and a clear relation to power" and "de-differentiates objects and their relations to orders of meaning and significance" (Krieg 2018, 44). Ash and waste in McCarthy's novel function in a similar way as Krieg's take on the flood in Roffey's novel. The dirt and trash dominating the setting are removed from social forces and, rather, obscure materiality and cultural memory, or myth, in relation to both the environment and the now-disintegrated society. Everything breaking down into ash has almost a democratizing effect, as one cannot decipher the power relations that once existed between humans

and the depicted American environment. The human body is also a site of this power contention, the protagonists attempt to contest the ash's intrusiveness in relation to their body.

4.3.2 Ash and the body

The ash not only obscures the distinction between things; it also challenges the way we conceptualize the human body. Linda Lorraine Nash considers our so-called modern conception of the body to be that of "Western allopathic medicine and American consumer capitalism", a body that is bounded by skin (Nash 2006, 11) and separate from the outside environment. The ever-present dirt, however, permeates the body and challenges this conception. Within material ecocriticism, the constant movement of substances in and out of the body is a way of demonstrating that the body is not a monolith separate from its surroundings. Looking to Stacy Alaimo's theoretical concept of transcorporeality, "the human body is never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity", rather "vulnerable to the substances and flows" (Alaimo 2010, 28). In a post-apocalyptic terrain, the remaining survivors negotiate with the ash and their bodily boundaries.

Few scholars have discussed the relationship between the atmospheric dirt and the characters' physiological experience. Mandy Chi Man Lo primarily relates the man's cough to the absence of things, "basic necessities such as food, water, and warmth", seeing his body's sickness and weakness as "metaphorically reveal[ing] the feeble maintenance of moral values in the face of survival" (Lo 2014, 71). In an article on Christianity in the novel, Pudney considers the connection between ash in the novel and Judeo-Christian myth: "This association raises the disturbing possibility that part of what the father and son are breathing in is in fact human remains, reduced to the dust and ashes out of which humanity was created" (Pudney 2015, 295). Unlike these scholars, I am interested in considering both the culturally-tied significance of dirt as well as the physiological impact of the ash inhalation.

It is made apparent to the reader that the protagonists are submerged in dirt, evident from its overpowering sensory presence throughout the novel. As discussed earlier, it is a visually dominant aspect of the landscape; their surroundings grey with "[e]verything covered in ash" (21), the impression is that of complete immersion in the burnt biosphere. The man and the boy attempt to keep their bodies separate from the dirt, persistently attempt to filter the ash from the water they consume (McCarthy, 215), the food they eat (41), and the air they breathe. The pervasiveness of the dirt, however, reveals the vulnerability of the human body.

The maintenance of a separation between the body and environment is virtually impossible in the wastescape. Appearing repeatedly, the mask is a staple accessory of McCarthy's storyworld, both to minimize its intrusiveness on the human body and to disguise the face and build a sense of the aforementioned anonymity in a disintegrating environment. As"[t]he appearance of control over dirt" through the removal or concealment of bodily filthiness is something Sullivan considers central to modernity (Sullivan 2012), the mask is their final attempt at upholding the virtues of modernity. Their best efforts at keeping clean and maintaining bodily integrity, however, seem futile as, soon after washing and replacing their masks with clean, fresh ones, "[t]heir masks were already gray at the mouth and their eyes darkly cupped" (169). Their pleasure in commonplace activities, washing and eating well, are undone in no time at all by the ash. Despite their efforts to extract it from water they drink, and the air they breathe, the "grainy air", constantly enters their bodies, evident from its taste that "never left your mouth" (20).

The materiality of the substance itself deconstructs strict boundaries between bodies and entities as "[t]he ashen scabland infects everything including pilgrim lungs, and walkers wear makeshift mouth scarves of torn sheets" (Lincoln 2009, 165). Despite their cleansing rituals, dirt reveals the extent of the human's immersion in the environment in a more insidious manner, through illness. The human body experiences symptoms and changes from this constant flow of dirty matter. The most apparent example of the toxicity of the ash is related to the main protagonist, the man. A motif throughout the story foreshadowing his death, the man's cough is unrelenting: "There was a cough in his throat that never left" (69). Even in low concentrations, particulate air pollution can negatively impact health (Dockery and Pope 1994), a physiological implication that constantly looms as the plot unfolds and the father's health deteriorates.

Though the story is almost entirely focalized by the man, the cause for the man's sickness is never revealed directly. With their masks constantly black with soot and images of the man "bent with his hands on his knees, coughing" with "a fine mist of blood" on "[t]he gray snow" (30), the association between the ashen environment and his ailing health is, however, subtly implied. Ibarrola-Armendariz has also speculated that his declining health is caused by the constant inhalation of dirt particles and smoke (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2011, 108). Additionally, towards the end of the book, the man and boy come across Ely, a lone, elderly vagabond, who poetically expresses a cynical outlook on God's and their own existence. During their conversation, Ely states that "[t]hings will be better when everybody's gone" as "[w]e'll all breathe easier" (McCarthy 2006, 183), hinting at the heaviness of existence both anatomically and morally.

Finally, I want to consider the more metaphorical aspects of the mask, as it signifies the loss of identity, much like the absence of proper names. In one of the more optimistic, and rather morally objectivist, readings of *The Road,* Ashley Kunsa argues that the lack of proper names shifts the reader's focus to the actions of the characters, reinforcing its ethical, moral dimensions (Kunsa 2009, 63). Adding to Kunsa's reading, it is worth noting that leaving protagonists unnamed is strikingly unusual, heightening its thematic significance in *The Road*.

Jordan Stump remarks how, similarly to Adam or God, an author must name his characters "in order to keep their boundaries distinct and their world orderly" (Stump 1998, 9). McCarthy digresses from this literary convention by omitting the protagonists' names entirely, further enhancing the sense that the conceptual and physical boundaries between separate entities are disintegrating. Indeed, the mask lends a sense of anonymity to its wearer and even dehumanizes its wearer. When the man and the boy encounter a cannibal face to face, the cannibal is described in a way that takes away his human qualities: "He cocked the pistol and held it on the man…the dirty crumpled paintmask that he wore sucking in and out […] Eyes collared in cups of grime and deeply sunk. Like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes" (65). The mask obstructs their view of his face and disconnects him from an identity. As a result, the focus shifts to his eyes, which are likened to that of an animal. Though the mask is a means for keeping their bodies separate from the disorder of their environment, it also takes away some of their human features.

The descriptions of their frequent ingestion of dirt, however, heightens this sense of full enmeshment in dirt. During a sequence when the two near starvation, they no longer attempt to remove dirt from their food and drink: "In the barn they scavenged a few handfuls of some grain he did not recognize out of the dusty floor of a metal hopper and stood eating it dust and all" (94). Intended to illustrate their desperation and heighten the reader's anxiety, they no longer go through the rituals of retaining their bodily separation from the ash.

4.4 Chapter conclusion

To conclude my discussion of ash in *The Road,* dirt reveals the complexities of the environment and challenges American conceptions of nature. Unlike in previous scholarly considerations of *The Road*, I approached the novel through the theoretical framework of material ecocriticism, placing focus on the more-than-human agency of dirt. By considering the material and mythical significance of dirt on the environment, I demonstrated how ash challenges American preconceptions of nature in the novel.

The agency of ash arises from its complex material makeup, carrying a nuanced conversation with Judeo-Christian mythology.

Altering normative expectations of an American idyllic landscape and alluding to the myth of creation, the novel depicts how the ash interferes with biological processes, leading to the extinction of nearly all living beings. Active, fluid and all encompassing, the ash also makes the environment unpredictable, rendering previously significant symbols of control over the environment meaningless. Finally, the ash defies the dichotomy of human and nature by revealing the porousness of the body. Despite the protagonists' efforts to maintain a separation between them and the ash, the ash as a material is invasive and resists control. Overall, ash is a complex matter with mythological resonance, challenging the way the characters approach nature in the altering environment. Continuing to an analysis of dirt in *The Water Knife*, I similarly consider how dirt challenges the nature conceptions in the Southwest.

5. *The Water Knife* and Agentic Dirt

In the first analysis chapter, I considered how both *The Water Knife* and *The Road* draw on the recovery narrative, a story of regaining the Garden of Eden that has been highly influential in the American context. As mentioned previously, the recovery narrative is a mainstream story in cultures influenced by the Judeo-Christian traditions, particularly in America (Merchant 2). Considering the premise of the recovery narrative, a critical environmental factor separating humanity from the coveted new Eden is the quality of the land and their relationship with it. As a result of the Original Sin, the ground gains a negative connotation and humanity views the land through a desire to subjugate it in order to restore it to its former Edenic glory (Merchant 2003, 18). Through this mythological frame, dirt as an entity in the novels becomes significant. Given the ironic prominence of the recovery myth in the novels, how is this pivotal more-than-human entity treated?

In *The Water Knife,* the envisioned environmental apocalypse not only serves as a setting, but the source of conflict motivating action. Bacigalupi's novel sets the reader in a climate anxious, highly socially stratified American Southwest where the wealthy live in closed ecological paradises while everyone else struggles in the dusty, harsh outdoor climate with an ever-reducing water supply. Set mainly in Phoenix, Arizona, and temporally in the not-so-distant future, water has become a scarce

and coveted resource due to the devastating effects of long-term drought in the region. Nevada is the undeniable victor of the Southwest with its cut-throat approach to water politics, employing mercenaries called “water knives” to ensure its control over the area’s water resources. Following three protagonists, the plot revolves around finding water rights that have gone missing whilst surviving both the practically uninhabitable climate as well as mercenaries, gangs and the water authorities. To parse through the way dirt is portrayed in Bacigalupi’s work, I begin by considering dust as a material and how it in itself resists American nature expectations. I then consider the relationship between the dust and climate change in this speculative storyworld as well as its environmental impacts in a broader sense.

5.1 Dust as a material

Before considering dust’s agency more comprehensively, I want to emphasize its complexity as a material itself. Heather I. Sullivan has written extensively about “dirty aesthetics” and remarks on the “challenging” nature of dirt and its derivatives as a substance with both its “life-sustaining and toxic agencies” (Sullivan 2012, 515). To elaborate on Sullivan’s observation, dust is similarly ambiguous and defies a black-and-white interpretation in itself as its effects on an environment can be manifold.

To give a rough definition, dust is a fine matter scattered in the atmosphere, resulting from wind erosion on the surface of land (Field et al. 2010, 423), and emissions of dust are the result of a myriad of different agents acting on the land, both human and more-than-human, ranging from humidity to wind to human cultivation to the vegetation in a given area (424-425). For climate models, dust is considered by environmental scientists as both “a major environmental driver and a source of uncertainty”; atmospheric dust is important for ecological systems, but can significantly impact human health by causing respiratory complications as well as interfere with “basic ecosystem processes” even globally (423). Dust is used in the novel to demonstrate the material intricacies of the environment and how cause-and-effect is not always as straightforward as people think.

Arizona has become an arid dust bowl full of environmental refugees desperately seeking passage northward to a more hospitable climate. As Pérez Ramos summarizes in her discussion of the novel, the impacts of the environmental devastation in this speculative Arizona are complex, “with…a polluted atmosphere carrying airborne diseases and being constantly hit by sandstorms, Red Cross relief tents close to pay-for water pumps, and the population using ‘Clearsacs’ to purify liquids, such as urine, in order to drink them” (Pérez Ramos 2016, 53). In contrast to *The Road*’s apocalyptic ashen landscape, the abundant atmospheric presence of dirt, manifest as dust in this setting, is associated

with the interplay between anthropogenic factors, natural forces and the material prospects of the region. The complexity of the airborne particulate is explicitly presented to the reader in small expositional snippets in the novel. As Angel drives into Phoenix, he listens to the residents of Phoenix discussing the changing environment on the radio. One caller remarks that "[i]*f we weren't wasting so much water on farming,* [they'd] *all be fine"* while another caller reminds the listeners that "[i]*f you cut off farms, you got dust storms…Where the hell does he think all this dust is coming from*" (Bacigalupi 2015, 122, emphasis in original). The impact of these overlapping agencies acting upon the top soil is difficult, if not impossible, to predict. Additionally, as Pérez Ramos argues, the past generations' denialism of the regions water management issues are often referred to (Pérez Ramos 2017, 60), with the *Cadillac Desert* is a recurring motif throughout. Focalized through Angel, the reader is provided with a historical account of water practices in the area, highlighting once again the discrepancy between utopian nature expectations and the reality of a harsh environment with limited water resources:

> They'd played dress-up-in-green and pretended it could last forever. They'd pumped up the Ice Age and spread it across the land, and for a while they'd turned their dry lands lush…Those places had dreamed of being different from what they were…And then the water ran out, and they fell back, realizing too late that their prosperity was borrowed, and there would be no more coming. (Bacigalupi 2015, 98)

The lack of foresight or grasp of the region's material limitations, an insistence at living a game of dress-up at the expense of depletion, invites the reader to engage with the dust as a symptom of a lack of insight. The people made optimistic assumptions of the material prospects of the region.

In addition to the complex causation of this speculative dust bowl, the effect of dust itself on an environment is difficult to predict. As material ecocriticism is preoccupied with the complexities of material agency, dust is a complex material that cannot be interpreted straight-forwardly in any of its manifestations. It evades our human impulse to categorize and does not fit into a dualistic classification of good or bad. Dust is always present around us and is also crucial for our ecosystems. Ever-present in the air, it also challenges the human/nature dichotomy by placing our nostalgic attitudes towards nature as clean and separate from us into question (Sullivan 2012, 515). Dust demonstrates the complexities of an environment grappling with the uncertainties of climate change and hence the narrative power (Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 83) of the more-than-human. Unlike in *The Road,* where the ash is the primary propagator of a change in the climate, in Bacigalupi's work, the causation is more ambiguous and the agentic role of dirt more a reminder of the cultural, social, and ecological factors at play in the environment.

The ambiguous nature of dust is further strengthened as there is no singular, simply identifiable root cause for its presence. Because its emergence is not straightforwardly describable, the dispersed dirt is a manifestation of the multifarious emergence of climate change, a symptom of the broader play between climate factors and social forces, namely corporate greed and unethical water politics. In her article on water management portrayed in Southwestern dystopian fiction, Pérez Ramos also draws attention to the interlacing factors of climate change and water scarcity as the sources of devastation in the area (Pérez Ramos 2016, 53). Practically the only remaining source of water in the region is the Colorado River, making every human in this dystopian storyworld desperately dependent on its water supply (Bacigalupi 2015, 52). As Pérez Ramos emphasizes, Bacigalupi merely paints a harrowing, speculative account of a water management issue that is already acknowledged in the American Southwest (Pérez Ramos 2016, 47). In this speculative account, however, the unsustainable water management practices along with the changing climate are made tangible to the reader.

5.2 Dirt modifying environment

Because of its ambiguous nature as a material and phenomenon, I see dust as the ideal entry point into a material ecocritical discussion of more-than-human agency and how it deconstructs a more traditional American approach to the land as a passive entity. Taking the form of dust, soil defies the expectation of passivity supposed by the recovery narrative. Instead of focusing on the human working and mastering of the land, Bacigalupi's work frames dust as an important agentic force that modifies the environment including the human perception of it. Looking at dust's defiance, I begin by considering how dirt modifies and influences the relationship of the characters with their environment both perceptually and materially.

5.2.1 Perception and dust

The persistence of dust in the atmosphere serves as a constant reminder of how things will no longer return to a state of ecological normalcy, at least the kind of status quo propagated by American nature attitudes as discussed in the first analysis chapter of this thesis. Experienced within the region as rising temperatures and resulting water shortages, the climate has changed drastically with drought portrayed as the new norm.

Regarding all matter as "text", Iovino and Oppermann state that "human agency and meanings are deeply interlaced with the emerging agency and meaning of these nonhuman beings" (83). In other

words, more-than-human agencies influence the way humans understand the world and correspondingly human conceptions influence the way we interact with matter. Inspecting this interaction between different human and more-than-human agencies reveals stories that can no longer be categorized as purely human narratives.

The image of buried Pompeii is drawn as a point of comparison to the environmental disarray in Phoenix: "*You know what this is really like? Pompeii. By the time it's over, we're going to be covered in dust fifty feet thick*" (Bacigalupi 2015b, 122). Phoenix residents attempt to understand the consequences of the perpetual dust storm, looking to Pompeii to make sense of the changes in their environment. Considering the human and more-than-human bodies of Naples as texts, Iovino discusses the excavation of Pompeii and the way it affected how Vesuvius, a volcano thought to be a mountain throughout the region's history due to its long phases of inactivity, was conceptualized (Iovino 2014, 106). When the volcano erupted in AD 79 and buried Pompeii under magma, the Pompeiians were surprised, evident from their silhouettes, as the people of the region had forgotten the volcano's agency (106). The landscape, she concludes, is "the material and cognitive context of memory" and is thus "a transformative site of cognitive categories" (107). With an entire city and a way of life buried under the lava of what was thought to be a mountain, the lava and the bodies encased within it tell a complex story about a civilization and the forgotten more-than-human agency of what was thought to be "'simply' a mountain" (106). Applying some of these ideas to Bacigalupi's novel, human conceptions of the land are similarly disrupted by the overt expression of dust's agency in the Southwest.

The dust is the violent manifestation of dirt's agency in the storyworld, having previously been dormant at least in terms of overt, perceptually evident agency. As the soil transforms into dust because of a multitude of interacting phenomena, the dust changes the landscape, transforming the community's conceptual descriptors and revealing its transformative potency as well as the porosity of the discursive and material world. Lucy considers how words and concepts gain new meaning as the climate changes:

> Weather anchors used the word *drought,* but *drought* implied that *drought* could end; it was a passing event, not the status quo. But maybe they were destined for a single continuous storm -- a permanent blight of dust and wildfire smoke and drought, and the only records broken would be for days where anyone could even see the sun--- (Bacigalupi 2015, 30-31)

Apparent in Lucy's focalization, she is processing the implications of a changing environment through the lack of a terminology to describe it. The repetition and italic emphasis of "drought" brings semantics to the forefront, highlighting the exasperation she feels over the inadequacy of language to

convey the ecological reality. The words society uses to relate the concept of a dry spell, perhaps the most pressing and experientially immediate climate phenomenon Phoenix is grappling with, are becoming meaningless as they do not flex to the permanency of the anthropogenic climate. The manner in which the weather phenomenon is conceptualized always assumes a return to normalcy, a balanced, serene nature. Instead, Lucy tentatively acknowledges the possibility of a perpetual disarray. Like in *The Road,* the peculiarity of the dirt-ridden environment is emphasized through the waning sunlight.

Furthermore, the semiotic repercussions of the dust-ridden environment reveal its impacts on the sense, which are discussed in depth a bit later in this chapter. The novel is littered with descriptions of the focalizers' visceral experiences of the grueling elements. Sullivan and Schaumann use the concept of "dirty nature" in attempts to reframe our approach to our environments, immediate and otherwise. Instead of limiting nature to the traditional, often aesthetic images of green, abundant landscapes, dirty nature includes the grimier, more industrial, even urban side of nature (Sullivan, Schaumann 2011, 105). Crucially, the two scholars attempt to "reinfuse nature with the agentic processes occurring all around us rather than delineating it as isolatable places that we can leave, neglect, or destroy at whim" through dirty nature (105). Indeed, looking at the setting in this manner, the non-traditional aesthetics of nature in *The Water Knife* reveal the agentic properties of dirt.

Like with *The Road,* Bacigalupi seems to put forward a reverse story of creation with Lucy recognizing the loss of names as aspects of her world go extinct. Similarly to *The Road,* there is a loss of meaning as the dirt changes the parameters of sensory capability. Lucy particularly laments over the visual dulling brought on by the dust, relating her experience of the color blue:

> Sun blazed down, hot and relentless, glaring through a muddy veil of powdered soil kicked up by commuter traffic. Even on a clear day like this, the sky seemed truly blue only directly ahead. Lucy smeared muddy sweat off her brow and wondered if she even knew what true blue looked like anymore…Dust eternally hazed the air here, and if not dust, then the gray smoke of California forest fires. (Bacigalupi 2015, 82)

As dust alters the ecosystem, society, and the very sensory experience of Phoenix, its inhabitants lose a set of previously commonplace words to describe their lives. As someone who writes professionally, it is no surprise that Lucy has a semiotic lament over signifiers that exist ghost-like despite their correspondent signified dissipating out of experiential, material existence, stating that "[m]aybe she'd been down in Phoenix for so long that she now made up names for all sorts of things that no longer existed. Blue. Gray. Clear. Cloudy. Life. Death. Safety." (82) This sentence, naming things that no longer exist in the physical world, is rather nonsensical, which further highlights the disorientating

impact of the dust. The repetition of "maybe", as she considers the possibility that "[m]aybe she'd forgotten the color blue, and it existed only in her imagination now" (82), emphasizes the limitations and changing parameters of perception in a place that no longer resembles your expectations. Akin to a mythic belief in an Eden on earth, there is a discrepancy between Lucy's expectation of a blue sky and the actual sky, which she perceives as some other indescribable shade. It once more cements the discrepancy between mythology and materiality. In this story world, soil does not comply with the human-propagated fantasy of a lush paradise on earth. Though largely aesthetic, the character's sensual encounter with the setting draws the reader's attention to the ecological implications of a sky so densely infused with particulate that manner in which the sky and the landscape is conceptualized is altered.

Already discussed in the first analysis chapter, I still want to return to Maria Villarosa and her relationship with her father to illustrate how the characters' perception of their surroundings and prospects is related to dust. Through Maria, we get an understanding of the intergenerational differences in regards to American values and environmental attitudes. The discrepancies between old world expectations and real-world limitations is rather poignantly discussed through Maria's and her late father's perceptions of the environment. Her father, who was formerly a farmer in San Antonio before they were forced to leave as environmental refugees (41), still sees the environment and subsequently their prospects through the recovery narrative. Maria, on the other hand, looks past these mythic expectations.

In Merchant's work, she discusses how even at the time of initial Westward movement by European migrants, the promises pertained to the West contradicted "the realities of living" there, such as the difficulty of farming such arid regions ranging from drought to technological and financial limitations (Merchant 2003, 126). Despite their undeniable idealism, these migrants continued to be lured and hopeful in their endeavors to colonize the region largely due to the Eden recovery narrative, which put forth that "anyone who worked hard enough could participate and…anyone could profit" (126). This idealism is still echoed in the contradictions of material reality of the environment and Maria's father's assertions on their possibilities: "He kept saying that this was America and America was all about freedom and doing what you wanted, but the crumbling America that they drove across…most definitely wasn't the America he kept inside his head" (Bacigalupi 2015, 49). Indeed, here the mythologies of America as a place of inexhaustible possibility persist in his memory and are in conflict with its dusty plains. He is, however, unable to rework this frame of mind, and his belief in the myths of America and subsequent denial of its material realities is portrayed as tragic through the focalization of Maria. He "couldn't see what was right in front of his face" (49); in other words, he seems oblivious to the ecological and societal situation in the region, which is impacted by a network

of agencies including drought, political forces limiting interstate migration, poor irrigation practices, and dust.

Wealth, however, has the ability to mitigate one's perception of the Phoenix environment, something Maria's friend Sarah remarks on. Describing Michael Ratan's life as a "fiver", or someone earning a five-digit salary, in Taiyang arcology, she tells Maria that "[she] wouldn't believe how nice Phoenix looks when you got decent air filters and you're up high" (48). The arcology allows for the suspension of disbelief, creating distance through elevation, insulating its residents from the physical unpleasantness of climate change, and allowing them to continue living their lives according to their American values and beliefs.

5.2.2 Dust and the American way of life

Dirt functions as an immediate, physiological indicator of climate change in the city of Phoenix, and its presence is constantly juxtaposed to the projection of what a so-called normal American life and urban environment were previously. The agency of dust on the urban environment is largely portrayed through its disruption to the American lifestyle, reiterating the residents' relationship to previously commonplace consumption. The car is an American icon that many scholars consider an embodiment of various American values, making it a symbolically potent motif in the story.

Discussing American car culture in theater design, Christopher Innes states that the car is one of the most potent elements and symbols of the American way of life that represents the ideals of motion, democratic liberation, and individual self-fulfillment (Innes 2005, 156). Similarly, Kara Thompson points out how cars "keep tenets of American exceptionalism, including *freedom* and *mobility*, ever-present" (Thompson 2017, 102). In addition to invoking the possibly most pivotal American value of freedom, the speeding car is also a metaphor for progress (Wilson 1991, 34). Moreover, considering the car from an environmental perspective, it also has a pivotal factor in shaping the landscape into what it is today. As the centrality of the automobile to the American lifestyle cemented, it began having an instrumental effect on the land, changing the environment with its roads, traffic, and worsening air quality (Wilson 1991, 33). The automobile continues to be used by policymakers, drivers, planners, and corporations alike to alter the "national landscape" with highways, suburbs, and the development of new types of architecture to better accommodate it (Sheumaker and Wajda 2008, 53).

Playing off the American frontier, another extension of the recovery narrative, the car culturally "creates a symbolic space in which dreams of freedom and conquering frontiers can be kept alive"

(Murray and Heumann 2010, 158). Concurrently, however, car culture has also concretely molded the landscape, and the car has been and continues to be a major contributor to climate change. The car is often depicted as an aggressor on the environment in American environmentalist discourse, as it contributes to air pollution and transforms the natural landscape into a man-made one with its highways (Murray and Heumann 2010, 155). Because of the car's significance as an interpretively multilayered symbol, it further emphasizes the agentic properties of the dust.

Bacigalupi plays off this strong, dualistic cultural association to the American frontier and the car as climate antagonist, instead deviating from both of these expectations entirely as it is faced with dust:

> She plowed down Phoenix's six-lane boulevards, the empty optimistic cross streets of a car culture now so drifted with dust that vehicles moved in single file between dunes, glued to one another's taillights as they navigated the hillocks of a city being swallowed by desert. (Bacigalupi 2015, 32)

In *The Water Knife*'s Phoenix, the car is stripped of its aggression and potency both symbolically and literally. The agency is, instead, attributed to the dust, which is piling into mounds and hence transforming the man-made landscape in its turn, "[t]he streets disappear[ing] into a wall of roiling dust" that forces automobiles to "[pull] over, [wait] it out" (32). By making explicit mention of American car culture and simultaneously halting this cultural symbol, Bacigalupi places the environment at direct odds with an artefact that is so closely relates to the American identity. The physical evidence of a past automobile culture, highways that once accommodated a mass of vehicles, is contrasted to the single-file traffic. Even the car's antagonistic relationship to the environment is subverted, instead being pacified, stopped dead in its tracks, by the already transpiring climate disarray attributed to its emissions. The significance of the car in relation to dirt continues in my consideration of the dirt's defiance of the human sphere in the following section.

5.3 Dirt defying human/more-than-human boundaries

The prevalence of dust in the Southwest has environmental and sociocultural implications for the people of Phoenix. As discussed in the previous section, loose soil is a concrete, experientially dramatic manifestation of a changing climate and its ability to resist and reconfigure societally held values and nature expectations. Another fascinating agentic feature of dirt is how it tests the boundaries of the human and more-than-human. To unpack these ideas, I begin by addressing the pursuit to separate the human body from the immediate environment through the car and arcologies. I then into how dirt directly affects the bodily experience in the setting.

As already put forth, the car is both a metaphor and embodiment of progress in America. It has also impacted the way Americans move through the landscape, now an observer removed from its materiality. Similarly, the arcology has been manufactured to artificially sustain the ideals of a pristine environment. Looked at from a material ecocritical perspective, the dichotomy of outside/inside and human/more-than-human is upheld through the exclusion of an other. Dust, however, problematizes this disengagement from the environment as I demonstrate in the following section.

5.3.1 Separation

Already discussed for its importance in revealing dirt's agency as dust significantly alters American car culture and thus influences cultural practices, the car is also used to demonstrate the ambiguous boundary between humans and the more-than-human. Seeing the car as a domed environment not unlike an arcology, the car itself is an attempt to make the human experience of the natural world one less physically submerged and, similarly, wealth and power determine whether one can afford this separation. In terms of the car's inbuilt technology, air conditioning, a feature that was first introduced in the mid-20th century, gives drivers "the illusion of human control over environment" as they can themselves regulate the temperature of their immediate surroundings (Wilson 1991, 37).

The cars of Bacigalupi's storyworld are in constant combat with dust, embedded with technology aimed to ensure that the vehicle is a purely human space unscathed by more-than-human disarray. Alexander Wilson remarks how technological add-ons to the automobile drastically altered the sensory and aesthetic experience of American nature, simplifying it merely to a visual one through a "picture window". In other words, the technology-enabled climate of the car is not intercepted by the more unpleasant aspects of the outside, such as cold, "the dust and heat" (Wilson 1991, 37). Thinking about the conceptual implications of this, the contemporary car is an extension of the body/mind dualism as it further insulates the body from an affective experience. Heather I. Sullivan remarks that "[t]he appearance of control over dirt is…an essential part of the move into modernity" (Sullivan, 527). The material discourse between dirt and the car throughout the work, however, problematizes these assumptions, contesting the illusory nature of a boundary between the human and more-than-human sphere.

As Lucy leaves her home to report on a story, the first time in the novel that the reader experiences Phoenix's climate firsthand, she ducks into the ostensible safety of her car. Compared to the brutality of the dust storm, Lucy's car, its door "[s]lammed…closed behind her", separates her from the

intolerable weather outside. Representing freedom through mobility and control over her environment with its closed-off air-conditioned climate, the ideals embodied by the car are immediately undermined: “When she powered up the truck, dust motes swirled inside…She revved the engine, trying to remember the last time she’d changed the filters on its intakes, hoping it wouldn’t clog and die” (31-32). A mobile particulate, the dust is already present in her vehicle, the air quality no longer something she can wholly control. The dust has altered the aesthetic experience of the automobile, no longer sheered down to its solely visual components through an adjustable air-conditioned climate. Additionally, the car’s promise of free movement is compromised as the dust interferes with its mechanisms. The dust does not allow for the illusion of a manageable environment or the uncompromised freedom to roam it.

Contrasted to Lucy’s less technologically efficient car, Angel’s is an extension of his comfortable, dustless life in the arcology. In the novel, he first encounters Phoenix in Chapter 9, appropriately from the safety of his vehicle as he arrives. The dust functions as a pivotal experiential difference between those outside and Angel in his high-tech car: “Dust layers, one upon the next upon the next. Inside the Tesla cool A/C pumped in a steady hiss through HEPA filters Angel felt cocooned from the world outside” (121). Inside the comfort of his car, the dust, a source of anxiety for Lucy, feels almost like a shelter for Angel.

As demonstrated, car culture as a whole is drastically affected by dirt, illuminating a discrepancy between the possibilities of material reality and the American values and ideals epitomized by the car. It is noteworthy that Maria, the protagonist portrayed as the one at the biggest disadvantage, does not own or use a car. Symbolically, this further enhances a sense of social immobility. Maria is stuck in the physical realities of the city, barely surviving. Much like an arcology as previously mentioned, the car motif itself works to highlight the unfair distribution of wealth and prospects, technological progress through technological advancements only available to those who can afford them.

As mentioned in the first analysis chapter, visions of an Edenic paradise lead the reader into the otherwise inhospitable environment. The rigid boundaries between the “[o]utside” where “there was only desert and death” and the “life” of the “inside, surrounded by jungle greenery and koi ponds” (62) and the associated social stratification are central topics of the story, with some attempting to permeate into the rich artificial arcologies, some protecting the exclusivity of these resources by any means necessary, while others seeking to uncover the corrupt nature of the entire stratifying enterprise. The entire focus of Chapter 17 is to reveal the desperate attempt to maintain a separation from the disorderly natural environment for those in the portrayed society who can afford it. As a reaction to an environment that no longer reflects the harmonious and plentiful landscape propagated

by persistent mythologies around nature, they avoid facing the reality of an impactful nonhuman agency by building the illusion of one. Pivotal to this illusion is the denial of dirtiness.

When Lucy attempts to meet Michael Ratan, a senior hydrology specialist (51) who Maria and Sarah have partied and slept with, she simultaneously gives the reader a glimpse of the contrast between the upper and lower tiers of the society: "The reward for Taiyang inhabitants was a space that felt as if it were entirely removed from the dust and smoke and collapse of the greater city beyond" (208). Lucy, as focalizer, gives us a critical and societal breakdown of the lifestyle of the arcology dwellers; a crucial aspect for them is the separation between themselves and the disorder outside. It is, however, a fickle fantasy, which is emphasized by the use of the word "felt", instead of the more definitive "was" when referring to its separation from the outside.

The illusion of self-reliance, natural orderliness, and human control over the environment is just a feeling and hence easily nudged into dissonance. The fragility of a sense of control over their environment is encapsulated by Lucy's interaction with the security guards in charge of protecting the mirage that is the Taiyang arcology:

> Outside the arcology's walls, Phoenix was collapsing into whatever hell it was destined for, but the Taiyang wasn't like that. They didn't like it when scraps of the apocalypse like her squeezed inside…[The security guard] was too accustomed to pushing people out. Too many people slipped in to get close to this luxury of the water misters and filtered air free of smoke and dust, the cascade of water and the rich smell of living earth and plants. (Bacigalupi 2015b, 208-209)

In *The Water Knife*, separation between dirt and the human is presented to the reader as a juxtaposition of higher and lower tiers of the novel's society. The arcology, manufactured to perpetuate the nature ideals rapidly disappearing in the outdoor environment, is reserved for the wealthy. The wealthy maintain the cohesive illusion of human dominion over the environment, characterized by the control over the arcology's borders. As Simon C. Estok states, "[t]he control of materials (and people) constitutes so very much of the self-mythologizing of humanity that a loss of both that order and control is, to put it bluntly, dangerous" (Estok, 135). This danger motivates the ignoring of material realities and an insistence to maintain the mythic illusion of human control over the environment.

The security guards function as gatekeepers of the arcology, deciding who disturbs the tranquility and order of the space. Cleanliness, or the absence of dirt on the body, as well as a look of purposefulness grants you access onto the exclusive premises: "And if you were cleaned up enough and looked as if you had business, you could get into the public plazas and have a coffee or arrange a meeting" (208). It ties in with the idea of dirt as a symbol of otherness, as a basis for exclusion. Furthermore, watching

Angel blend into the Phoenix crowd, Lucy states that he looks like "[j]ust another dusty person who'd seen hardship and, because of that, was invisible" (291). The association between harsh circumstance, dirtiness, and the accompanying invisibility is underscored in *The Water Knife's* setting where the presence of dust on your person is enough to stigmatize you and render you inconsequential in this dystopian society.

Much like in *The Road,* underground, a place literally engulfed and insulted by dirt, is portrayed as a safe haven in a moment of utter desperation. Caught in a "gathering dust storm" (417), Lucy sits in her car with Angel and ponders what future archeologists might coin this current era: "*The Outdoors Period. For when people still lived outdoors.* Maybe in a thousand years everyone would be living underground or in arcologies, with only their greenhouses touching the surface, all their moisture carefully collected and held. Maybe in a thousand years humanity would become a burrowing species, safely tucked underground for survival---" (422). The repetition of "maybe" makes Lucy's contemplation seem more like a plea, a speculative, bittersweet fancy of human survival only intensifying the sense of the environment's uncontrollability. As in McCarthy's work, underground survival is a temporary solution ignoring the actual problem, merely one prolonging full comprehension of the ecological reality. On a metaphorical level, the association is one of human extinction. Invoking the biblical Fall, Lucy's fantasy paints an image of the remainder of humanity literally returning to the dust of the earth. Even in the novel's most optimistic projection of the future, the recovery narrative put forth is heavy-laden with irony.

5.3.2 Enmeshment

Having looked at the attempts to separate the human body from dirt through technological means, I now shift the focus to the bodily experience. Climate novels tend to have a strong emphasis on the external effects of climate change, expanding from merely a psychological or internal depiction (von Mossner 2017, 174). *The Water Knife* is no exception to this, "channel[ing] its dramatic evocation of climate change's external effects through the minds and bodies of its protagonists, thus allowing readers to imaginatively experience *what it is like* to live in a climate-changed world" (von Mossner 2017, 174). Pérez Ramos argues that Bacigalupi uses "multiperspectivity to voice the point of view of different characters, presenting the complexity of the situation from a very human standpoint" (Pérez Ramos 2016, 53). Indeed, through the experiences of these three characters, the intensity of the sensory experience of a changing climate is conveyed to the reader. As the impact of the elements on the individual are thematically central to climate fiction, dirt specifically brings the porousness and vulnerability of the human body to the forefront.

Approaching the people of Phoenix and their environment through Stacy Alaimo's framework of "trans-corporeality" provides interesting avenues of discussion. Recognizing "the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" (Alaimo 2012), the bodily experiences of the protagonists, along with the rest of Phoenix's population, greatly vary depending on the character's affluence. Within climate justice discourse, it is acknowledged that "people living in poverty are exposed to…structural inequalities, making them particularly vulnerable to harm from hazards unleashed by climate change" (Dunlap and Brulle 2015, 137). The sociopolitical makeup of the novel's setting communicates the bodily repercussions of these environmental inequalities experienced by the economically and socio-politically vulnerable.

Arcologies, non-toxic locations, are inaccessible to the majority of Phoenix's inhabitants. The more affluent the character, the more separate they can afford to be from the dirt. Even access to something as essential as clean air to breathe is more and more of a luxury. As discussed previously, Angel gives the reader an idea of the insulated experience of the arcology and his experience of the outside world is rather distant. He spends much of his time in arcologies, witnessing the detriment of the outside world through data and analytics and speeding in his high-tech Tesla. Lucy and Maria, on the other hand, live in the dusty city and the physical ramifications of climate change are a part of their daily experience; however, their bodily experiences of dirt nonetheless differ. As a cli fi novel, *The Water Knife* offers its readership a concrete, visceral imaginary of bodily enmeshment with the environment; however, unlike the financially well off arcology dwellers, the disadvantaged, marginalized characters outside have less of a possibility to mitigate the toxicity of dirt on their bodies.

Building on Alaimo, Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker (2013) address the fact that we tend to consider ourselves removed from climate change and the environment in the West, suggesting a new climate imaginary in which we recognize that we are "weather bodies" and can "never entirely protect ourselves from the elements that also move through our bodies" (563). The reader encounters the dire climatic crisis of Phoenix through the focalization of Lucy as she heads out of the protection of her home to cover a news story. Contrary to *The Road*, where the voice of third-person narrator is rather distant from the focalizer, here they are in close proximity to one another, providing an intense, immersed physical experience: "Sand blasted her skin raw as she ran toward the memory of her trucks location." (31). With the verb choice, the dust is invasive, chafing and exposing Lucy's skin, and hence challenges her bodily boundaries.

The intrusive quality of particulate further as emphasizes the enmeshment of the human body in the Phoenix environment. Voluntarily a Phoenix resident, Lucy more financially well off than most in

the city, reflected in her ability to moderate dirt's impact on her body. A motif shared by both *The Water Knife* and *The Road*, the mask presents a technological effort to mitigate its negative impacts. The mask affords Lucy some control over her environmental experience as she "strapped on an REI filter mask and grit goggles" and "took a final breath of clean air" (31). Maria, on the other hand, cannot comfortably afford the apparatus that adapts the body to the environment through technological means (107).

Unlike Lucy, Maria's body feels the impact of climate change in the Southwest much more intimately: "Last night's storm had messed with her chest more than usual, bits of dust burying themselves deep in the dead-end branches of her lungs. She was coughing up blood and mucus again. More and more, the blood was a common thing that they never spoke about" (44). In this excerpt, Maria relates the mechanical implications of dust inhalation, branching out into her lungs and causing abrasions to the membrane. Looking to Neimanis' and Walker's ideas, Maria's encounter with the dust demonstrates that "[t]he body…can no longer be understood as an autonomous entity, unaffected by…its environment" (565) in the dustbowl. Her bodily experience has been redefined by dirt and, as the narrator implies, coughing blood is the new norm of living in the region.

5.4 Chapter conclusion

Like McCarthy's novel, *The Water Knife* utilizes dirt as a more-than-human agency to reveal the conflict between a relationship with the environment solely informed by American conceptions of nature and the material limitations of the Southwest. Read from a material ecocritical perspective, the dust challenges normative ideas of nature through various facets. The presence of the dust epitomizes the complexity of the environment as dust is the result of a myriad of interconnected habits and agencies, including poor water management, optimistic irrigation practices and more-than-human agencies such as the wind.

The dust also modifies the environment, evident from how its changes the way the characters perceive their habitat. Discussing the car as the symbol of American progress, dust also intervenes in the American way of life. Finally, the agency of dust is also evident in its invasiveness. It reveals the enmeshment of the human body in its immediate surroundings despite efforts to maintain an illusion of separation. Additionally, the dust reveals how climate change affects people differently depending on their socioeconomic status in Bacigalupi's storyworld, with disadvantaged characters experiencing direct impact on their health.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I argued that the climate fiction novels *The Road* and *The Water Knife* invoke the American recovery narrative, creating a tension between the myth's anthropocentric premises and the environment, its material constraints and more-than-human agencies. Through a dialogue and tension between the mythical and material aspects of soil and dirt in the settings, the dirty matter challenges American nature attitudes by revealing ecological complexities, modifying the environment, and dissolving putative human/more-than-human boundaries. I considered how dirt as a more-than-human agent provides an access point into the mythical and material revision of nature in the light of climate change. Using mythcriticism and material ecocriticism as my theoretical approaches, I found that dirt disrupts nature expectations in the two novels, and the conversation between American myths and dirt is far more nuanced than I had originally expected.

In my introductory and theoretical chapters, I introduced the theoretical approaches of mythcriticism and material ecocriticism as well as important theoretical concepts used in the analysis chapters, including climate fiction as a literary category, Carolyn Merchant's recovery narrative concept, and Heather I. Sullivan's dirt theory. I then grounded my analysis by presenting an overview of American mythology and nature concepts, and provided a brief overview of previous scholarly work into the novels. In my first analysis chapter, I demonstrated how the works allude to Judeo-Christian mythology, using recovery narrative concept to summarize these ideas. Looking to the novels, I consider their allusions and references to the Garden of Eden as well as pilgrims and settlers, both of which are significant cultural symbols in America.

In the two subsequent analysis chapters, I consider dirt as an actor causing this disturbance to nostalgic nature views instilled in American mythology. In my close reading of *The Road*, I demonstrate how ash acts as an agent by disrupting biological processes, obscuring the characters' ability to determine place and time, and interfering with the human body. It hence breaks idealistic ideas of a harmonious nature, human mastery, and human/nature dichotomy. Similarly, in my consideration of *The Water Knife*, I show how dust functions as an agent by modifying human perception of the environment, disrupting the American way of life, and challenging the separation of the human body from the environment.

As for my thesis' contribution to the field of literary criticism, I see this thesis as attempt to apply the concepts and ideas of the rather theory-heavy theoretical paradigm of material ecocriticism. Despite growing interest in posthumanist perspectives in literary scholarship, I have still come across relatively few material ecocritical readings of literature. In the beginning of my thesis-writing process,

I admittedly went rather theory first, wanting to explore the possibilities of a more non-anthropocentric reading and interested in applying material ecocriticism in a literary reading. With a clear vision that I wanted to explore the material and mythological dimensions of dirt in the environment, I chose to focus my attentions on novels that contained portrayals of environments caked in dirt.

As someone who is acutely concerned about the environment and sees the necessity of rethinking our relationship with our surroundings in order to mitigate the effects of anthropogenic climate change, this thesis is also a form of environmental activism for me. Looking to something as easily dismissed as dirt, I wanted to dissect its complexity and agency in the novels. Realigning our relationship with dirt, something that seems inconsequential on the surface, can have a profound effect on how we conceptualize our environment.

The Water Knife and *The Road* are both full of more-than-human agency and complexity for further literary analyses. One avenue of study that did not fit into the scope of this thesis is applying a material ecocritical perspective to the migrant experience. Both works deal with migration as a result of an environmental catastrophe, with *The Water Knife* directly discussing the marginalization experienced by migrants as they relocate. *The Water Knife* directly speculates on the sociopolitical implications of such migration in a techno-capitalist Southwest.

Alternatively, approaching *The Water Knife* through a waste studies perspective could be an interesting avenue of future critical consideration, perhaps by considering how the exclusion of dirt dangerously becomes synonymous with the exclusion of the most vulnerable within the storyworld's society. The security guards function as gatekeepers of the arcology, deciding who disturbs the tranquility and order of the space. Cleanliness, or the absence of dirt on your body, as well as a look of purposefulness grants you access onto the exclusive premises: "And if you were cleaned up enough and looked as if you had business, you could get into the public plazas and have a coffee or arrange a meeting" (Bacigalupi 2015b, 208). It ties in with the idea of dirt as a symbol of otherness, as a basis for exclusion.

Furthermore, watching Angel blend into the Phoenix crowd, Lucy states that he looks like "[j]ust another dusty person who'd seen hardship and, because of that, was invisible" (291). The association between harsh circumstance, dirtiness, and the accompanying invisibility is underscored in *The Water Knife's* setting where the presence of dust on your person is enough to stigmatize you and render you inconsequential in society. As one can see, in future material ecocritical analyses of the novel, a waste studies perspective could be valuable. Similarly, considering the significance of water as a more-than-human agency in both *The Water Knife* and *The Road* could be an interesting avenue of material

ecocritical consideration by applying Neimanis and Walker's concept of "weather bodies", as considered in the previous analysis chapter. In *The Road*, water is both a necessity for life and an immense danger for the protagonists.

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